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The Inn by the Sea

Charlotte E. Gray



J.W. Wilson

1951
Z.W.



The Inn By the Sea

The Inn By The Sea

BY
CHARLOTTE E. GRAY

*Author of "Experimental Object Lessons," "Out of the Mire,"
and "The Jericho Road."*



*"The Ideal is in thyself, the impediment, too, is in
thyself; the condition is but the stuff thou art to shape that
same Ideal out of; what matters whether such stuff be of
this sort or that, so the form thou givest it be heroic, be
poetic?"—THOMAS CARLYLE.*

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JOY WEA
SUGAR
WATER

The Inn By the Sea

Chapter I

SWINGING her empty tin pail, Portia tripped across the meadow. She had been carrying lemonade to Donald in the field. Stooping under a wire fence, she paused just beyond it to look down upon the town. The Dennison farm was situated upon a hill which half encircled the village of Oakdale. Silvery glimpses of the river, which bounded the other side of the town, were visible to Portia through gaps in the trees, and her eyes drank in the beauty of the scene appreciatively. Emerging from the white houses of the village, and meandering up the hill in picturesque deviousness, a woodsy road wound toward the Dennison farmhouse, and as Portia gazed, a masculine figure came into view upon it. The man had reached the brow of the hill and was evidently bound for the farmhouse. Portia glanced at him curiously; then, to avoid meeting him, turned into a little path which

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would take her to the kitchen-door. But suddenly she halted abruptly, for the new-comer, who was now quite close, swept off his hat with a flourish while he called in tones of undisguised gladness:

"Pearl! Pearl! Miss Overton!"

A quick, hot tide flooded Portia's face, and she stood still while the young man advanced eagerly toward her between the rows of lilac bushes. His hat was still in his hand, and thick blonde hair clung to his damp forehead in rings. Evidently he was not accustomed to hill-climbing in a hot spring sun. His dark-blue eyes were flashing with pleasure at the sight of Portia, and his white teeth gleamed in a smile as, all unobservant of her unresponsiveness, he dropped his grip and extended his hand.

"My dear Miss Pearl," he exclaimed, seizing her fingers, "what a delightful surprise to find you in the country! Why, you look like a different girl already!"

"I am a different girl," was Portia's cold rejoinder as she forcibly withdrew her hand. "You have evidently made a mistake."

"A mistake!" Blank amazement overspread the young man's countenance, and his arm dropped to his side.

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"Certainly a mistake," repeated Portia, impatiently. "I have never met you before," she added, as he still continued to gaze at her, speechless.

"Never met me before!" Such utter astonishment was pictured in the face before her that Portia's pink cheeks dimpled for a second; but calling back her dignity, she said:

"And my name is not Pearl Overton. I am Portia Dennison."

An angry flush began to mantle the young man's countenance. His blue eyes grew keen as they searched the fair face before him, moving scrutinizingly from the soft waves of light-brown hair above the broad, white brow, down to the large brown eyes, the pink, rounded cheeks, to the firm little chin and the white throat beneath. Could there be two such faces as this in the world? he asked himself. And emphatically he decided in the negative. This was not an ordinary face; one which could be easily confused with another. The delicate arch of the eyebrows, the soft little curls which looked like gold where they clung to the white throat and blew about the forehead, were details he had observed until they were perfectly familiar to him. His eyes swept the lissome form, dwelling for a moment upon the slim

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hands with their tapering fingers, and his form stiffened.

"Pardon me, Miss Overton," he apologized, icily.

"Dennison," she corrected.

"As you please," he acquiesced, turning away with frosty dignity.

Stung by his tone, Portia took one quick step after him; then, checking herself abruptly, she turned and ran around the path to the back door instead. She entered the kitchen with flaming cheeks and angry eyes, and as she did so the sound of the front door-bell rang through the house. A short time later Aunt Caroline appeared in the kitchen-door.

"I am glad we have that chicken cooking, Portia," she observed. "We shall have company for dinner."

Portia was bending over the stove, prodding an inquiring fork into a steaming kettle, and her face was flushed. Turning, she approached the comely, middle-aged woman, who was tying a gingham apron around her waist.

"Aunt Caroline," she demanded, "who is that man in there?"

"Our new lodger."

"Oh, Aunty!"

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Mrs. Dennison went to the stove and, taking the fork, investigated for herself the contents of the kettle.

"I didn't expect him until next week," she observed. "I am glad he has come, though, for your uncle seems quite pleased at his arrival."

Portia opened her lips to speak, but closed them again, and taking up a dish, she disappeared into the cellar. When she ascended to the kitchen again Mrs. Dennison took forcible possession of the pan, which was now filled with potatoes.

"Do n't stain your hands, dear," she said, kindly; "I will have time to pare the potatoes myself after I make the chicken-pie. Could n't you manage a salad and make a dessert?"

"To be sure I can." Portia's irritation had evidently been buried in the cellar. She began stepping lightly about the kitchen and pantry, and her face was bright as she chatted with her aunt.

"We shan't need to put on many extra frills for this man of yours, shall we, Aunt Caroline?" she queried.

"None at all," was the response. "Mr. Hamlin liked our home ways when he spent

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that week with us last summer. You were not at home then; so you have never met Mr. Hamlin, have you, darling?"

Portia was setting the table in the dining-room, and she frowned as she straightened the cloth with painstaking care.

"Never," she replied, briefly, turning to the sideboard for the silver.

"He enters into our ways as naturally as though he had always lived among us," continued Aunt Caroline, complacently. "Of course, he will go to the city every Friday night," she added.

"Every Friday?" Portia bent over the napkins, sorting them busily.

"Yes. Mr. Hamlin is a literary man, and the reason he wants to stay with us this summer is because he has important work to do and wants a quiet place to write in. He needs to go to the city as often as once a week, he says, to consult reference-books in the library, and so on."

"Oh!" Portia was engrossed in placing a bowl of early spring flowers in the center of the table.

"It is a strange coincidence that he will always be away on the same days that you are," mused Aunt Caroline. She was bustling

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about, putting the potatoes on to boil. "Your uncle, Donald, and I will be doubly lonesome now, for I foresee it will not be long before we come to look upon Mr. Hamlin as a member of our own family. Such a pleasant young man!"

Portia opened the cellar-door. "I am going for the salad-dressing, Aunty," she said.

Elmer Hamlin had much ado to keep his eyes away from Portia's sparkling face at dinner-time. The dining-room, with its wide windows open to the south breeze, was a cheerful place, and it was a pleasant family which gathered there. Aunt Caroline at the head of the table, and Uncle Henry in his wheel-chair at the foot; their stalwart son, Donald, ruddy from his ablutions, and Portia, dainty and cool as though she had never entered a kitchen. The young girl offered her hand with a demure smile and murmur of greeting when Elmer was presented to her, and Hamlin felt his indignation melting moment by moment, although he manfully strove to retain it. How beautiful was the young girl opposite! If he had admired her in the city library, bending over books and wearily answering the incessant demands of the public, how much more was she to be admired here, where the setting of her

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beauty was so much more appropriate! To be sure it was strange that she had denied her identity. He frowned a moment as he thought of the two different names she claimed. Her rippling laugh at this moment cleared his brow, however. How pleasant it was to see her so happy! She had never laughed so in the city. There had always been an undercurrent of sadness in her rare laughter at the library, and never had he seen the shadow wholly lifted from her soft, dark eyes until to-day. Certainly he was glad she was at home again, here in this pleasant family circle. Her change of names and her—her— He bit his lip. Even the mild word “prevarication” was one which he disliked to use in connection with her startling statement that she had never met him before. No doubt she was joking. Yes, of course, she was merely indulging in a girlish jest. He raised his eyes to her face.

“Do you prefer the country to the city, Miss —er—Dennison?” he inquired.

“Oh, yes; that is—”

Portia hesitated, glanced at Donald, and blushed a little. In her conversations with Donald she often chafed at the restrictions of country life.

“Portia knows so little of the city that she

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probably finds that question hard to answer," remarked Uncle Henry.

"Ah?" Hamlin raised his eyebrows and gazed searchingly into Portia's embarrassed face for a moment.

"Yes," continued Mr. Dennison, "Portia attended the university for four years, to be sure, but her vacations were all spent at home; so, in reality, it is very little of city life that Portia has seen."

"She even came home every Friday night and stayed until Monday morning," interposed Aunt Caroline.

"Yes, she used to always be at home on Sundays, and now she never is," grumbled Donald.

"But it is kind of the child to go every week to cheer poor Agnes," defended Aunt Caroline, with a reproachful look at Donald and a loving one at Portia. "You see," turning in explanation to the lodger, "a friend of Portia's, Mrs. Ilverton, who lives in the village, is having trouble with her eyes. She is a widow with only one little girl, and Portia thinks she must be very lonely; so she has been going into town every Friday and spending the week-end with her. Father and I have Donald for company on Sundays; so we don't miss Portia at all,"

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she added, turning to the girl with a little laugh.

"Oh, no; not in the least," agreed Uncle Henry, turning with another loving laugh; and Portia laughed also, although her color deepened under Elmer's steady gaze.

"And it is always on Saturdays that I go to the library," he commented; and all except Portia glanced at him in surprise. His remarks seemed malapropos to them, but Portia's eyes emitted a spark of anger.

During the afternoon Hamlin engaged himself in his room, and Portia, who spent the time in the flower garden, caught only a fleeting glimpse of him now and then as he descended the stairs in search of hammer, nails, and other articles needed in his settling. During supper she was unusually quiet, and when Donald took the milk-pails, afterwards, she followed him out of the back door. The stock was kept at "Donald's place," a farm adjoining, which Mr. Dennison had given to his son upon his coming of age. The stable at "Donald's place" was eminently satisfactory, but the house was old-fashioned and lacked many conveniences, which, however, as Donald's father informed him, could easily be added should he ever desire to live there. At present the house was

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occupied by Nathaniel Smith, his wife, and his daughter Lizzie. Smith worked Donald's farm on shares, and Mrs. Smith boarded the hired men of both farms. During Portia's absence at the university Lizzie Smith had assisted Mrs. Dennison in her housework. The path between the two farms was well worn, and the distance was not great. When Donald and Portia entered the stable, a hired man was already at work milking, and the stable was sweet with a clover-like fragrance. The cows lowed gently as they turned their great, mild eyes upon the new-comers, and Portia moved among them with caressing pats and friendly pushes, while Donald set about his task. When the pails were finally filled with foaming milk, she followed Donald to the house and saw them delivered into the hands of Mrs. Smith.

Chapter II

TO have Portia's company at milking-time had always been a delight to Donald. Her habit of following him to the stable had been formed in childhood, and as they grew up together into youth and girlhood, these twilight walks came to be prized as times for confidential conversations, in which each told to the other their thoughts and feelings and plans. During the years when they were separated, attending different colleges, letters had taken the place of the talks; but upon the first evening of every vacation Portia had gayly seized her sunbonnet, appropriated one of the pails, and led the way to the "bossies." To-night, as they started slowly upon their homeward way, Portia slipped her hand through Donald's arm and said:

"Do n't you sometimes long to get away from the farm, Don?"

Donald glanced down at her with protest, and she continued, hastily:

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"Oh, I know you love the farm, Donald. So do I, of course, and yet—"

"Yes?"

"Well—well, really, you must acknowledge that life here is very commonplace. What can one do or be or accomplish on a farm?"

"You seem to do and be and accomplish a great deal on a farm," he deliberated.

"Housework!" with scorn.

"Very good housework," firmly.

"Humph! Dish-washing, bed-making, sweeping, cooking. Ugh!"

"Do n't you like housework, Portia?" regretfully.

"Oh! *Like* it! I would n't care whether I liked it or not, if only it was n't so—so—"

"Commonplace?" dryly.

"Well, but, Donald, you do n't understand how I feel. I can't be satisfied to waste my life in doing nothing for the world. I confess I am surprised at *you*. How can you settle down on this farm? You, with your brain, your ability. You ought to be somewhere in the thick of things, moving men, changing conditions, bettering mankind."

"And in the meantime, what would become of my father and the farm?"

"Uncle Henry could hire the farm worked,"

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she commenced, eagerly; but Donald held up a silencing hand, while every line of his strong face set in decision.

"Never, Portia," he declared. "There was a time," he went on to acknowledge, "when I had other hopes and ambitions. The farm was not my choice of occupations, but father's paralytic stroke settled the matter for me. When he looked up so piteously and groaned, 'The farm, Don, the farm,' I assured him that I should stick to the old place, and I shall do so," he ended, with decision.

Portia's red lips drooped pathetically, and Donald smiled down into her eyes.

"And what form does your ambition take, little Portia?" he queried.

"You are not laughing at me, are you, Don?"

"Most certainly not."

"I have my ideals," she confessed, "and I dream and dream about how I can benefit the world. You believe in ideals, do n't you, Donald?"

"Assuredly I do, Portia," he returned, with seriousness. "I realize that underneath all great achievements there is a longing for an unattained ideal, and the work done is accomplished in the struggle to attain that ideal."

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"Well, then, Donald, can't you sympathize with me when I say that I want to do something?"

"What do you want to do?"

Portia hesitated, and when at last she spoke, her voice was lowered. "Donald," she said, "I long to be a poet."

Her suspicious eyes never left his face, but they detected no trace of amusement there; and so she continued:

"There is a work for me to do in this world, and I feel it and know it. The most beautiful thoughts come to me at times, and I long to put them into words."

"Well, why don't you? Surely a poet could not ask for more congenial surroundings," glancing around appreciatively.

"Oh, but, Donald, if I am to write great poems, I must be where I can mingle with people of all kinds, and learn to understand their passions and their hearts."

"You will never understand such things, Portia, save through your own—" he halted. "Suffering" was the word he wanted to use, but his tongue faltered at it. But Portia was paying little heed to him.

"I have decided to go away, Donald," she declared. "I am going to draw my money out

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of the bank and go and board somewhere in the city for a year."

"Portia!"

"Yes. I want to be in the very heart of everything, where people are living and doing great things all the time, and where I can get inspiration and help."

"Of all foolish, *foolish*—"

Donald paused abruptly. Elmer Hamlin, charmed by the beauty of the evening, was strolling about, enjoying the balmy air. The sun had disappeared in the west, and the moon, just arising in the east, was mingling her soft glow with the twilight, enveloping the world in a lustrous illumination, tender and lovely. Elmer had paused and was gazing dreamily at the fading golds and garnets of the horizon when Donald and Portia stepped into view. The young girl, distressed at Donald's ejaculation, had just clasped both hands about his arm and was looking pleadingly up into his face. Above her head the eyes of the two young men met. Hamlin grew slightly pale as he inclined his head and turned away, and Donald's eyes dropped again to Portia's face.

"Well, well, little Portia," he said, reflectively, "perhaps, since you wish to go away,

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it might be as well for you to go for a short time—a *short* time," he repeated, as Portia, delighted, launched into a discussion of her plans. He heard her absently, interrupting only once to remark, decisively:

"Of course, I shall go with you and see you settled; and as for your money in the bank, do n't be absurd, Portia. It would only be a drop in the bucket, anyway. Father and I will supply you with funds, of course."

Portia broke into indignant objections, but Donald scarcely heard her. The expression he had surprised in Elmer Hamlin's eyes was occupying him fully.

Hamlin at that moment was walking with quick, nervous steps on through the deepening twilight. How the sight of Portia in such familiar proximity to Donald Dennison had disturbed him! Portia! Could he ever learn to call her so? Pearl was the name she had borne in the city; Pearl Overton. His mind went back over his acquaintance with this young girl. During a period of several months he had seen her weekly at the branch of the public library where it was his custom to spend every Saturday afternoon in research work. Her beauty had attracted him from the first day

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he saw her, and as time went on he found it more and more pleasant to be assisted in his search for books by her willing hands. The branch was in charge of a woman much older and, unquestionably, more efficient than Pearl; but the young girl's efforts to please were so eager and her pleasure when he succeeded was so pretty to see that he sometimes even invented wants in order to watch her endeavors to satisfy them. Their acquaintance had ripened rapidly into friendship, and deep in Hamlin's heart was growing a desire to secure this exquisite young creature for his wife. The leaves stirred gently in the evening breeze, and to Elmer's ears floated the sound of a girlish laugh. He started and bit into his lip savagely. How was he to reconcile the events of this day with his previous conception of Pearl's character? Was the girl whom he had considered so pure, so transparent, capable, then, of subterfuge, of deliberate falsehood? Was she leading a double life? Deceiving her kind uncle and aunt? These thoughts were disquieting enough without the additional misery inflicted by the picture, which would not be banished from before his mental vision; the picture of Pearl, her hands clasping Donald's

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arm, and her eyes lifted in trusting confidence to Donald's face. The fire of love which had been slowly kindling in Hamlin's heart for Pearl flamed suddenly to anguished heights, and he writhed at the thought that possibly she had already bestowed her heart upon another. This handsome young farmer, her aunt's son! Elmer stopped suddenly in his tracks, and a short, relieved laugh broke from his lips.

"Fool! Dolt! Idiot!" he apostrophized himself. "The fellow is her cousin, of course! Probably she was brought up with him, and, no doubt, they love each other like brother and sister."

Brother! How the word soothed him! Once again the world took on form and color to his eyes. The blue and silver of the skies, out of which the flush had now died, smiled peacefully down upon him, and the grass at his feet, dotted with dandelions and buttercups, seemed never so beautiful before. He drew a long, deep breath. In his relief all perplexities took wing together. Poor little Pearl! How severely he had been judging her! No doubt she could explain all things satisfactorily, and no doubt, too, she would be willing to do so if he approached her rightly. Something in his

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manner must have irritated her that morning and caused her to act perversely. What did he care, anyway? She might indulge in as many whims and jests as she chose, if only she would be kind to him.

Meditating thus, Elmer retraced his steps until he was once more in front of the house. On the porch stood Portia, alone. Against the blue curtain of the sky trembled the evening-star, and the young girl's face was upturned to it as she leaned against a pillar, her lips half parted in a dreamy smile. She was dressed in white, and her hands were filled with buttercups and daisies which she had gathered while passing through the meadow. Elmer paused only for one moment's adoring gaze, then he ascended the steps at a bound.

"Pearl," he exclaimed, "how glad I am to see you one moment alone! Won't you tell me—"

He hesitated, daunted for a second by the chill of the glance she turned upon him; then, rallying himself, he attempted to seize her hand and hurried on, pleadingly:

"Do n't look at me like that, Miss Pearl. What does it all mean? Won't you explain yourself to me? Surely you know that I will

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respect your confidence and will carry out your wishes in every way I can. If you prefer to call yourself by another name—or if Portia really is your proper name, and for some reason you wish to be called Pearl in the city—”

“How dare you!”

Portia had stood like a statue so far, the blood receding drop by drop from her face, until even her lips were white; but now she flushed in a sudden passion, and her eyes flashed with anger.

“How dare you!” she repeated, and Hamlin drew back in amaze and disappointment.

“Pearl,” he began; but she stamped her foot in a fury.

“My name is Portia,” she flashed. “I told you this morning that I never saw you before. I have never heard the name of Pearl Overton, and I never want to hear it again.”

Her unwonted passion died suddenly and left her pale and trembling. Pressing a handkerchief to her lips, she turned to leave the porch. Disarmed by the sight of her distress, Elmer sprang forward again.

“Pearl—Portia—Miss Dennison!” he stumbled.

“Do n’t speak to me!” choked the girl,

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shrinking from him. "Never speak to me again!"

And, reaching the door, she disappeared through it, leaving Hamlin gazing after her in a maze of conflicting emotions.

Chapter III

THE next two days passed uneventfully. Portia assumed a manner of dignified aloofness during the time she was forced to spend in Hamlin's society, and his demeanor toward her was one of equal coldness. Donald, noticing with relief their attitude, began to repent of his hasty acquiescence in Portia's plan of going to the city. Portia, however, was plunged in eager preparations for her flitting.

"I believe I won't tell Uncle Henry and Aunt Caroline that I am going until I am all ready," she confided to Donald. "It is going to be hard to make them understand, anyway. I have written to a girl I knew at school, asking her to find me a boarding-place. She will know exactly what I want."

And Donald, filled with gloomy misgivings though he was, forbore to remonstrate since her face was so happy and bright.

On the forenoon of the third day she tripped blithely off toward the field where Don-

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ald was working, carrying her customary offering of lemonade. The sun threw golden gleams into her brown hair and touched warmly her pink dress. The meadow was starred with dandelions, and a lark upon a fence-post was showering his liquid notes into the air. Portia paused a moment under a spreading oak-tree to watch a pair of robins building their little home among the branches. Turning to resume her way, she glanced down over the town, and suddenly an expression of dismay overspread her features. The depot-hack was bowling up the road toward the Dennison house, and within it were seated several figures which she recognized. A frown drew her brows together and an impatient exclamation escaped her. The sight of a little form leaning forward out of the hack softened her face slightly, however, and when a sturdy little arm waved vigorously in her direction, she even smiled a trifle as she turned and hastened on toward the field.

Donald discerned at a glance that something was amiss, and asked, as he took the pail:

“What is it, Portia?”

“Donald!”

“Well?” smiling.

“Oh! Oh it’s outrageous! I would never endure it if I were Aunt Caroline!”

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"Why, what in the world is the trouble?
Has the butcher sent up pork instead of beef-
steak? Has Mrs. Brown used all the cream?
Or has—"

"Aunt Annabelle Emmett has come!"

The teasing light died out of Donald's face,
and he sat down upon the grass.

"Did you bring a tumbler, Portia?" he
queried.

"Yes; here it is," extracting a glass with
difficulty from a diminutive apron-pocket.

"Have a drink?" Donald filled the glass
and held it up, but Portia waved it back im-
patiently.

"Oh, Donald," she lamented, dropping
down beside him, "do n't you see? Now I
can't go!"

A sudden satisfaction sprang to Donald's
eyes, but he kept his gaze upon the glass he
was refilling.

"Can't go?" he repeated. The prospect
of Aunt Annabelle's society for an indefinite
period was not cheering, but if it would be the
means of keeping Portia at home, it might
perhaps be borne with a certain fortitude. A
glance at Portia's woe-begone face caused his
generous heart to smite him, however, and
draining his glass, he said, cheerily:

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"Why, certainly you can go, little Portia. If you are thinking of the extra work this visit will make, do n't worry for a moment. I will have Lizzie Smith come over from my place to help mother."

"Oh, it is n't only the work, although it is very kind of you to think of that, Donald. But you know how nervous Aunt Annabelle makes Uncle Henry. He can't run away from her when she gets unbearable, as the rest of us can, and I always try to entice her away from him when she is too trying. And Aunt Caroline must n't be worried too much, either. Evelyn is so aggravating at times. I am afraid, Don, that I'm not talking very appreciatively about your relatives."

"Mine!" indignantly. "They are no relatives of mine."

"Well, they certainly are not mine."

"Let me see," mused Donald. "Aunt Annabelle is father's sister-in-law's cousin, is n't she?"

Portia laughed, but tears lay closely behind the laughter, and a few forced their way into the brown eyes, and her lips quivered even while they smiled.

Donald frowned and racked his brains for comfort.

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"Did little Earl come, too?" he inquired, naming the most lovable member of the family.

"Yes. Dear little Earl! I should be glad to have him always with us. There was some one else, too."

"Who?"

"I do n't know. A girl, I think. Four people added to our family. I must hurry home, Donald, to help get dinner."

"Portia," Donald's voice was stern as he arose to his feet and looked down at her, "never, as long as you live, go to visit any one without an invitation. It is one of the most inconsiderate, selfish things that you can do. Do you suppose that whenever you want to cut down your own expenses, and enjoy a pleasant season, being waited upon and entertained, that you have a right to pack your trunks and descend without warning upon some unsuspecting relative?"

Portia commenced to murmur something, but Donald pursued, relentlessly:

"If you would have the grace to write first, and ask whether your presence would be agreeable and convenient at that time, it would give the victims an opportunity to intimate that they had a few plans of their own. Suppose they had already planned to take a trip, or suppose

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they had invited a houseful of company? Suppose some member of the family was ill? Your presence might be extremely inconvenient."

Portia laughed, her good humor completely restored.

"Stop scolding me, Donald Dennison," she ordered, rising and shaking the twigs and grasses from her dress. "I am not going visiting. I am going home to get dinner for your Aunt Annabelle."

The getting of that dinner proved to be no easy task. Portia found, upon entering the house, that Uncle Henry, nervously upset by the unexpected arrival of guests, had been seized with one of the heart-attacks to which he was subject, and had had to be assisted to bed. This occurrence necessitated Aunt Caroline's absence from the kitchen, and thus Portia was left to wrestle with the midday meal alone. She looked around the kitchen and hesitated. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and before twelve the meat and vegetables must be cooked, the pie baked, coffee made, and the dining-room table enlarged to accommodate the extra numbers, and set for the meal. Aunt Caroline had been called away in the midst of her bread-kneading, and the half-finished loaves were upon the bread-board.

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"I 'll just pop this into the oven, the first thing," decided Portia, seizing the pie which Aunt Caroline had prepared and left upon the table. "Oh, dear, one pie won't go around; but I have n't time — ouch!" inadvertently touching a finger to the hot stove. "Now I will attend to this bread."

But under the nervous manipulation of her fingers the dough adhered provokingly to the board, and Portia, hurried and flurried, became powdered with flour as she desperately sifted it on. A patch of white was decorating one crimson cheek, and another whitening her left eyebrow, when Evelyn Emmett appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Do you like to cook?" queried that young lady, advancing leisurely into the room. She was daintily clad, and looked cool and comfortable. Aunt Caroline's rocker by the window met her eye, and she sank into it with satisfaction. "I suppose you understand domestic science thoroughly?" she observed, with condescension.

"I understand how to get a meal," returned Portia, shortly.

"So glad you do. I am so hungry. Now, if luncheon depended upon me—" she finished, with an airy gesture.

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"I am getting dinner," retorted Portia.

"Oh, yes, of course. I forget backwoods terms. You have dinner at twelve here, I remember."

Portia cast a glance at the clock. Dinner at two seemed more likely. Why couldn't Evelyn offer to do something? She deposited her loaves into their pans with vigor enough to discourage their rising, but at this moment the screen-door was pulled open and in dashed a happy-eyed little boy. Yellow curls tumbled in confusion about his brow, and his cheeks were rosy with delight. One chubby hand grasped an egg and the other a spray of flowers.

"There's a bird out in the yard that laughs and laughs," he cried, breathlessly, "and I've got a hot egg."

Portia's eyes grew soft, and she smiled. The boy advanced and held up his trophies eagerly.

"Feel and smell," he said, joyously.

"You must n't touch Aunt Caroline's flowers, you naughty boy," scolded Evelyn. "And keep out of the henhouse and such horrid places, or you will get your clothes dirty."

Grieved disappointment clouded the boy's blue eyes, and he turned with dismay to Portia.

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"I—I wanted to go barefoot," he quavered, "and—and there's such a lot of flowers."

Portia stooped and put her floury arms around the little form, and drew it close.

"Never mind, dear," she whispered, "we'll talk to Aunt Caroline about the flowers, and you are going to have a very good time here."

The smile came quickly back to the childish lips, and Earl tucked his flowers into Portia's hair.

"What bird is it that laughs at you?" he inquired.

Portia smiled as she arose. "It must be the wren," she answered. "Run and look among the vines on the back porch and see his little house."

The child darted out of the door, and as Portia turned back to the table she discovered still another invader of her kitchen. A slight, dark-haired girl was stooping to look into the oven.

"I thought I smelled something burning," she remarked, apologetically, glancing up at Portia's surprised face. "I will leave the door ajar just a trifle," she continued, adding, with a little blush, "I am Margaret Adams, Evelyn's cousin. Why don't you introduce me, Evelyn?"

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But Evelyn was straining her eyes through the window.

"Who is that young man under the willow, Portia?" she inquired, with animation, and the two other girls involuntarily smiled at each other.

"I can't see from here," Portia responded, indifferently.

"But you must know him. I thought the only young man around here was Donald. This fellow has light hair and stylish clothes. Who is it, Portia?"

"Aunt Caroline's boarder, probably." Portia's brow puckered as she turned back to her perplexities.

"I want to help you," declared Margaret, taking an apron down from a nail and tying it on. "Tell me what I can do. It must put you out dreadfully to have so many unexpected guests arrive suddenly. What shall I do first? I believe," looking around as Portia hesitated, "potatoes are the next thing in order. Where is the cellar-door?"

"What is that man's name, Portia?" insisted Evelyn.

"I'll get the potatoes if you really want to help," said Portia, looking gratefully at

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Margaret, "and I think it is very kind of you. I—I am glad you came," she added, pausing on the cellar-stairs and looking up into Margaret's black eyes with a very friendly light in her own.

Chapter IV

BY evening Portia was weary and depressed. The afternoon had brought many cares. There had been rooms to prepare for the visitors, extra cooking to be done, and various changes in the regular order of the house effected. Throughout it all Margaret Adams had worked quietly beside Portia, and between the two girls a cordial affection sprang up. Portia learned that Margaret was an orphan, who had been left by her father to the guardianship of Mr. Emmett. That the young girl was not quite happy in her new home with the Emmetts, Portia guessed from several little remarks which Margaret let slip.

"I never want to be a society woman like Aunt Annabelle and Evelyn," she confided, as the two girls were loading their arms with clothing from Portia's closet. Since Portia's was the pleasantest bedroom in the house, she felt obliged to vacate it in favor of Aunt Annabelle. "To be sure, I am not in society at all yet, and probably I shall be left in peace for

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a year at least," glancing with a sigh at her sober black dress. "But I saw so much of Evelyn's gayeties last winter, and they did not appeal to me at all. How happy you must be living all the year around here in the beautiful country, Portia!"

How happy she ought to be! Margaret's remark recurred to Portia that evening as she sat upon the steps. The family had gathered upon the wide veranda to enjoy the pleasant evening. Uncle Henry was in his wheel-chair. Aunt Caroline sat close beside him, one hand upon his arm. Aunt Annabelle, in an elaborately-trimmed gown, with powdered worldly face and an appearance of being very much out of her element, sat in a rocking-chair in the center of the porch. Evelyn, a young replica of her mother, sat in a porch-swing beside quiet Margaret Adams, and little Earl ranged happily between Donald and Elmer, who sat upon opposite ends of the steps and played with him to his heart's content. When Portia came out and seated herself also upon the step, the child endeavored to draw her, too, into his sport, but Portia was weary and distract.

"How can Margaret think such a life as mine is satisfying?" she mused, discontentedly, her mind traveling back over her day. "Noth-

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ing but housework," she fretted. The fact that because of her toil eight people besides herself were comfortable now, and would be during the night, escaped her. Her weary brain strove to see visions and dream dreams, but nothing bright came before her mental eyes. She was aroused from her musing by Earl, who threw an arm around her neck.

"Is it, Portia? Is it? Is it?" he clamored.

"Is what, dear?" Portia aroused herself enough to ask.

"I've been asking you if that is the end of the world?"

Portia followed the direction of the pointing finger and awoke to the beauty of the sunset. The orb of day, sinking slowly, was throwing his parting shafts of flame upward through a dappled sky. Cloud after cloud was catching fire and beginning to glow in splendid scarlets, golds, and pinks. A rosy flush lay over the tender green of the landscape. The windowpanes of the church in the town below caught the sun's farewell and reflected it in a golden blaze.

"Is that where the world ends?" queried the boy, and Portia turned her eyes to where prismatic colors were burning on the horizon.

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"Oh, Earl, how can you be so silly?" reproved Evelyn, impatiently. "The world does n't end at all."

"Does n't end?" repeated Hamlin, meditatively. His blond head turned toward Evelyn at last, much to her satisfaction. She brightened and cast a coquettish glance at him.

"Oh, you know what I mean, Mr. Hamlin," she simpered. "The world is a globe, of course."

"Is it?" mused Elmer.

"Why, you know it is, you naughty man," shaking a playful finger at him. "Every child knows that."

"I do n't," maintained Earl, stoutly. "I do n't know at all what the world is. Uncle Henry," he continued, running to the wheelchair, "what is the world?"

Mr. Dennison removed his gaze from the molten gold of the sunset and smiled down into the blue eyes.

"The world?" he repeated dreamily, "the world is an inn, my boy; an inn beside the sea."

"A inn? What's a inn, Uncle Henry?"

"Say *an* inn, Earl," corrected Evelyn.

Earl pouted, and Aunt Caroline drew him around to her side.

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"Come up into Auntie's lap, dearie," she comforted. "You must be tired out after all the running around you have done to-day."

"Yes," agreed the child, climbing willingly into the comfortable lap; "my legs are all achey because I walked to such a far place. There was a boy there, and lots and lots of flowers in the woods, and cows. We picked some, and he told me how frogs swallow their clothes, or is it snakes?"

Aunt Annabelle stirred impatiently. How bored she felt! "Caroline," she said, "do you never play bridge? Surely you must do something to pass these dull evenings away."

"These evenings are the happiest parts of our days, Annabelle," protested Uncle Henry.

"Oh, of course, to you they may be, Henry. A crippled man like you naturally does n't crave society."

Portia flushed angrily, and Hamlin turned quickly to Mr. Dennison, remarking:

"I have been pondering your observation about the world, Mr. Dennison. Why do you liken it to an inn?"

Portia arose and drew a low chair close to Uncle Henry's side. "Yes, why? Tell us, Uncle," she urged.

Uncle Henry smiled whimsically. "If you

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encourage me to talk, children, Aunt Annabelle will dub me childish," he demurred.

"You always were visionary, Henry," returned Mrs. Emmett. "Pray continue."

"Seeing the world as an inn was not one of my own visions, Annabelle," said the old gentleman. "When I was younger I read an allegory* in a *Harper's Magazine* which I have never forgotten. It was by some English author, and it described a dream which some one had."

"A dream!" gushed Evelyn, one eye upon Hamlin, who was bending toward Mr. Dennison interestedly. "I love dreams. Do tell it, Uncle Henry."

"One bright summer morning," began the old gentleman, "a traveler found himself standing near a vast ocean, upon whose shores stood an ancient inn. The front entrance was toward the road, the rear was washed by the sea. It appeared to be a place of much resort and was crowded with guests. Our traveler entered and, accosting a group of men, requested information regarding the building. He was told that it belonged to a great Proprietor

* An allegory entitled "The Inn by the Seaside" was published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1853. The author was Miss Anna H. Drury, and the article was not copyrighted.

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who lived beyond the sea. The men differed in their opinion as to the management of the inn, some contending that it was a miserably-regulated place, where there was neither fairness, order, justice, nor honesty. Others declared that it was in all ways admirably adapted to the reception of its inmates.

"Since none of us remain here longer than a day, why can we not be content?" asked one.

"A day?" ejaculated our traveler. "Does no one remain here longer than one day?"

"A day is the extreme limit," was the response. "Many do not remain so long. They depart at all hours; some almost as soon as they arrive."

"Where do they go?" asked our traveler.

"Across the sea," was the answer. "There the Proprietor has prepared a home for all. In that permanent home none of the wrongs, the sorrows, the trials which are endured here at the inn will be found."

"But the journey?" trembled one.

"Is it so dreadful?" queried our traveler.

"Not if one is prepared," he was told. "Ships arrive at all hours from the unknown shore, and messengers come from them to the ones who are called away. If one's reckoning

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is settled and one's sea-faring garment made, there is nothing to fear.'

"'Reckoning? Garment?' he questioned.

"'Yes;' he was told, 'every one arrives at the inn penniless; but the Proprietor has made provision for every one's wants during their day. All they have to do to settle their accounts is to go to the Reckoning Office, which is always open, and have their indebtedness transferred to the Prince's account. Neglect to do this, however, shuts them forever out of their home beyond the sea. As for the garments, every guest at the inn is expected to make one to fit himself during his day. Material is always at their disposal in the inn, and all are cautioned to commence their garment early in the day, since the clothing worn at the inn is quite unfit for the voyage, and also for residence in the new country.'"

A loud yawn from Mrs. Emmett brought Uncle Henry's voice to a stop, and he looked with a smile at Hamlin.

"I must be growing prosy," he remarked.

"No, preachy," corrected Annabelle. "You always drag religion into everything, Henry."

"It is already in everything," defended Mr. Dennison.

"Is the sea where the sun has dropped

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into?" queried little Earl, his sleepy eyes trying to peer beneath their heavy lids at the opal glow that lingered about the pathway of the vanished sun.

"Evelyn, do take Earl up to bed," said his mother, impatiently. "Caroline, what is that dismal noise that comes from that direction? Frogs? Ugh! Is n't there any way of stopping them? I believe I'll go in and see if I can find anything to read. Ah, me, how dreary it is in the country!"

The blush of shame which ought to have mantled Mrs. Emmett's face glowed in Margaret's cheeks, and she came forward quickly.

"I will take Earl, Aunt Annabelle," she offered, and Evelyn nodded approvingly.

"Do," she urged. "I do n't want to go in. Are n't there any pretty walks to be taken around here, Mr. Hamlin?"

Elmer bit his lip but, after a second, arose politely.

"Shall we go and see?" he invited, with as good grace as he could muster, and the two strolled away.

Aunt Caroline, smothering a sigh, followed her guest into the house, and Portia, Donald, and Mr. Dennison were left alone. For a while they sat in silence, the soft dusk settling

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like velvet around them. Portia leaned her head against Uncle Henry's shoulder and began to grow rested, both mentally and physically.

"It is a dear old inn, is n't it, Uncle Henry?" she said at last.

"We grow attached to our little part of it," he assented.

"But," she pursued, "since we are here for so short a time, how important it is that we do something! I intend to do something worth while, Uncle Henry."

"Doing is not half so important as being, my dear," commented the old gentleman; but Portia's eyes were upon a great bright star which had gleamed out in the sky, and she paid little heed to her uncle's remark.

Chapter V

WHEN Friday morning came, Portia arose in a depressed mood. Descending the stairs slowly, she was surprised to find the kitchen occupied. A fire was crackling in the range, and the kettle was singing merrily. The bright sunshine was streaming across the floor, robins and bluebirds were caroling just outside the window, and beside the table a sandy-haired girl stood slicing potatoes into a frying-pan.

"Why, Lizzie Smith!" cried Portia.

A little wren alighted for a moment upon the window-sill, where he burst into his rollicking song. Donald's step sounded upon the porch, and Portia's spirits began to arise.

"What does this mean, Lizzie and Donald?" she demanded.

"Come out on the porch a minute, Portia, and I will tell you," called Donald, and the girl stepped through the doorway out into the warm spring sunshine.

"Lizzie is going to stay here as long as the company does," Donald informed her, and her

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eyes lighted with gladness, although she protested a little.

"But, Don, there is so much work to be done at your place."

"I have found a good girl to help Mrs. Smith," he reassured her. "I knew you would rather have Lizzie here than a stranger, since she knows the house."

"Oh, Donald; how good you are!"

"I am, indeed. I am glad you appreciate the fact. You could n't have gone to Agnes Ilverton's to-night if I had not brought Lizzie over; so you see how self-sacrificing I am."

"But," hesitatingly, "ought I to go anyway?"

"Certainly you must go. I know how you enjoy walking with Agnes by the river, and your good times are not going to be spoiled while I can help it."

Thus it transpired that when, in the afternoon, Elmer Hamlin descended the stairs, suitcase in hand, prepared to start on his walk to the depot, he found Portia upon the front porch, her hat on, and a satchel at her feet.

"Do we take the same train to-day, Miss —" He hesitated and paused.

Portia raised clear eyes to his. Her cheeks did not flush, and she replied, in a surprised tone:

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"I am not going to take a train, Mr. Hamlin."

"You are not?"

"No. I am only going to the village to spend Saturday and Sunday with a friend. There comes Donald now. He is going to drive me down. Do you care to ride?"

Elmer's lips stiffened. He struggled a moment to control himself, and then turned abruptly away. Portia's voice recalled him:

"There is plenty of room in the buggy, if you care to ride, Mr. Hamlin."

Elmer dropped his grip and took one quick stride back to her.

"Pearl," he entreated, "be truthful with me. You know you are on your way to the city. You know I shall see you at the library to-morrow, as usual."

Portia took a backward step, and anger flashed into her eyes. Before she could speak, however, Donald called, and, choking back her words, she swept past Hamlin down the steps.

"Want to ride, Hamlin?" called Donald, pleasantly; but Elmer shook his head. Well satisfied, Donald assisted Portia into the vehicle, and they drove away.

When he reached the station, Hamlin involuntarily looked around for Portia; but she

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was not there. He sighed, however. There were two more trains to the city that day; one on each side of the river. In the car he flung himself into his seat with a heavy heart. That she could be so deceitful! so artful!

When Saturday morning dawned he was tormented with conflicting desires. At one moment he shrank from the thought of going to the library, thus putting to confusion and shame the girl he loved. The next moment his anger would burn, and he would long for the time to arrive when she would be forced to cease her foolish efforts to deceive him. She would have to confess her faults and, no doubt, she would try to explain her astonishing conduct to him. He would be very gentle and forgiving, he decided at last, as he walked toward the library building. Pearl was young and innocent; she little realized how wrong was the course she was pursuing. He would put the matter before her clearly and help her to get back to an honest, straightforward footing. He entered the door almost reluctantly at last. How ashamed she would be to face him! he reflected. He must make her confession as easy as possible for her. His eyes swept the room eagerly as he passed down between the rows of books toward a certain

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secluded corner, which he usually sought; but he failed to discover her. He seated himself at a table with mingled feelings. Disappointment and relief struggled together in his mind. The place seemed dreary without the beautiful girl he was accustomed to find there, and yet he was glad she had decided to remain at home. No doubt she had come to realize the error of her ways and—a slight rustle caused him to turn his head, and his meditations broke off abruptly. A slim girlish figure was advancing toward him, and a pair of brown eyes smiled a welcome. Elmer struggled to his feet with a feeling of suffocation in his throat. His eyes swept over her searchingly. The white-robed form was as graceful as when it had stood on the vine-clad porch yesterday. The slender hands with their tapering fingers had not changed. The perfect oval of the face curved into the beautiful throat in the same faultless line. He frowned as he scrutinized the golden-brown locks which rippled back from the broad brow. Then his eyes grew stern as they gazed into the upturned brown ones of the girl. Was this the shame and confusion he had expected to see? Where were her blushes, her tears, her confession? Could it be possible she expected to carry this farce

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farther? Surely she would not attempt the folly of trying to blind him even yet! A slight blush was tinging her rounded cheek now, but it was evidently called forth by the fixedness of his look.

"You did not wear your hair in that fashion yesterday," he accused her suddenly and sharply, and her eyes widened in surprise as she raised a questioning hand to her head.

"My hair?" she repeated.

"Yes, your hair," sternly. "You had it dressed higher yesterday."

"Last Saturday, you mean," she corrected him.

"Portia! Stop this nonsense at once. There is not the slightest use in trying to deceive me."

"Portia? Why do you call me Portia?"

Hamlin ground his teeth and partly turned away. The sweet brown eyes clouded and the red lips drooped.

"I—I always wear my hair like this," she faltered, "and you know my name is Pearl."

"Did n't you forbid me to call you Pearl?"

"I? Forbid you?" The brown eyes became round circles of wonder, and Hamlin's wrath rose higher. His blue eyes turned to steel, and he looked into her face steadily until

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the color forsook her cheeks and her mouth began to tremble. The sight of her quivering lips stopped the words which were upon Hamlin's tongue, but he turned away from her coldly and sat down by the table. She lingered beside him for a moment or two longer; then, since he did not turn his head, nor speak, she slowly moved away. For half an hour Elmer remained quiet. He opened a book and pretended to read, but he was conscious of every move the young girl made. What an actress she was! he fumed to himself; and he had always considered her so guileless and innocent. He would cast her out of his mind at once. She was unworthy of even a momentary thought. He turned a leaf and frowned heavily at the page. A soft rustle sounded near him again, and, although he disdained to raise his eyes, every nerve in his body leaped at the girl's approach. She laid a volume on the table before him.

"Mr. Hamlin," she ventured timidly.

No response. Elmer turned a leaf grimly.

"I found that quotation we gave up looking for last Saturday," the sweet voice continued. "It is where I have put the bookmark in this book."

She lingered for a second longer; then,

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since he still refused to speak, she opened the volume at the marked place, laid it down, and turned away again.

“Stop!” Elmer caught the fluttering white fingers and drew her back.

“Sit down!” he commanded; and she dropped into a chair.

“Now tell me what this means!” he ordered, sternly determined to sift the matter.

No answer, but reproach filled the big brown eyes which were lifted to his.

“What does it mean, I say?”

“I—I do n’t know.”

“Do n’t know! What are you doing here?”

“Working.”

“Bah! What are you working here for, and why are you here only Saturdays?”

“I am working for money,” was the meek response, “and they only need me Saturdays.”

Elmer’s frown grew blacker, and the girl’s lips showed signs of trembling again.

“So many children come Saturday, it makes a busy day here,” she faltered, a quaver running through her soft voice.

“What do you do the rest of the week?” probed Hamlin, resolutely steeling himself against the tenderness that welled up in his heart. The blush of embarrassment which he

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confidently looked for failed to redden the pure cheek, however, and the answer came innocently:

"I have n't found any work for the other days yet. In the fall, perhaps, I can get a school."

"What do you do the rest of the days? Where do you stay?"

"At home with mother."

"Mother!"

"Yes," meekly.

"If Mrs. Dennison is your mother, why do you call her Aunt Caroline?"

"Aunt Caroline?" Again the innocent eyes widened with wonder, and Elmer flushed with anger.

"Do n't open your eyes like that," he broke out, bringing his fist fiercely down upon the table. "Do you think you can make a fool of me? Do you suppose I am going to accept your double existence calmly? Call you 'Pearl Overton' here and 'Portia Dennison' at the farm? Am I—"

"Portia? Farm?" stammered the pale girl.

"Yes, Portia and the farm," he sneered. "Can you deny that yesterday you were Portia Dennison on a farm at Oakdale?"

Such sheer amazement was pictured in the

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face before him that even in the heat of his anger Elmer marveled at it. What a consummate actress she was! he reflected. But gradually into her expression crept other emotions: concern, doubt, anxiety.

"Can you?" he repeated sternly. "Can you deny it?"

"Of course I deny it, Mr. Hamlin," she returned, with gentle firmness; "and I know that you must be ill, or you would not rave so."

"Ill!" He choked with rage. He longed to take her by her slender shoulders and shake her. "You are Portia Dennison," he flung at her, savagely. "You are deceiving your good old uncle and aunt, and acting a lie every day of your life. It is useless for you to try to hoodwink me, and I warn you now that I shall tell the whole truth to your relatives as soon as I return to the farm."

"Very well," returned the girl, soothingly; "but ought n't you to go home now and rest yourself? And—and should n't you take something to—to—"

She faltered and broke off under the glare of his eyes; and he, with a muttered ejaculation, arose hastily and left the room.

Chapter VI

THROUGHOUT the rest of the day Hamlin avoided the library. Anger and disappointment surged within him, mixed at times with a tenderness and longing for the beautiful girl, whom he could not help but love. He passed a restless, unhappy Sunday. Somewhere in the city was the girl whom the trusting people on the farm believed to be safe in the cottage of Mrs. Ilverton. What was she doing, and why was she following so deceitful and wicked a course? Tortured by doubts and fears, at last he consulted a city directory; and finding a list of Overtons, he copied several addresses in his notebook and spent his day in visiting the various neighborhoods. Just what his object was in doing this, he did not ask himself; but, miserable and restless, he roamed about, and toward night his search, if search it might be called, was rewarded. Descending the steps of a respectable apartment house he saw Pearl Overton, dressed simply but attractively in white, and carrying a white parasol and a Bible. Be-

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side her, stolid, black-gowned, and unmistakably English, walked a severe-appearing middle-aged woman. The young girl halted, crimsoned, and shot a shy, questioning glance at Hamlin; but a wave of anger had surged up in Elmer's breast, and with a cold lifting of the hat he passed on without stopping. Glancing back as he turned the corner, he encountered a searching glance from the English woman, who, with no effort at concealment, had stopped and was staring fixedly after him.

Hamlin took the first train to Oakdale, Monday morning, and started on his walk to the farm with a firm determination to do his duty by informing the Dennisons of their niece's perfidy at once. The day was fair and beautiful, and the country road was charming as it lay smiling under the morning sun. Daisies and violets crept close to the path, and squirrels chattered in friendly fashion as they whisked their bushy tails among the leaves overhead. All nature seemed happy and at peace, and Elmer's unquiet heart began to grow calm beneath the benign influences all around him. How beautiful the world was, and how happy a habitation it might be if only Pearl, the most beautiful creation of all, were true as he once believed her to be! He had trav-

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ersed nearly all the way, when suddenly the sound of a child's laugh was wafted to his ears. He paused and looked around him. A little brown bird upon a hazel-bush cocked his head saucily and trilled a measure of a song, while its demure mate dived among the leaves with a long straw in her bill; but he saw no other sign of life. The childish laugh rang out again, mingled, this time, with another voice, the sound of which set Elmer's pulses to pounding madly. Quickening his steps, he rounded a curve and came suddenly upon a pretty scene. Portia Dennison was half reclining upon a green bank at the side of the road. She was holding up her round, white arms in merry protest, while a laughing, dark-haired little girl endeavored to crown her with a wreath of daisies. Catching sight of Hamlin, Portia dropped her arms suddenly and sat up, while the child, with a shout of triumph, pressed the wreath upon the golden-brown head.

"Good morning, Mr. Hamlin!" Portia greeted, arising and shaking the leaves from her dress. "You are fond of an early morning walk, too, are you?"

She evinced no emotion of any kind. She might have been expecting him to appear, so unconcerned was her demeanor. Flowers scat-

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tered left and right as she took up her hat, and she laughed.

"Amy has been decorating me," she said, lightly.

"You must have started for home last night," observed Hamlin, ignoring alike her greeting and her attempt at conversation.

"Last night! Oh, no, indeed," she denied, with a laugh. "We have walked slowly, to be sure, but not so slowly as that. The sun was certainly up when we started, was n't it, Amy?"

"Yes, he had rosen most a mile," assented the little girl, gravely.

Portia laughed again, and, taking the wreath from her own head, she dropped it lightly upon the black locks of the gypsy-like child.

"This is Amy Ilverton, Mr. Hamlin," she said.

The small lady politely offered her hand to Elmer, but suggested at the same time rather impatiently:

"Can't we hurry on now, Portia? I 'm all hollow inside, like a drum."

"You and I shall certainly enjoy our breakfast, Amy," laughed Portia, "and I hope Mr. Hamlin is as hungry as we are. Amy is going to stay with me for awhile," she added, to

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Hamlin, as they started on. "Her poor mother's eyes are so bad that it is hard for her to look after the child; so I am going to keep her with me."

"I thought you asked me just 'cause you liked me," interposed Amy, somewhat resentfully.

"So I did," Portia hastened to assure her. "I love you dearly, Amy; but my pleasure in having you is all the greater because I know it is helping your mother, too. Come, dear, let us take hands, and see how quickly we can run up this hill."

The three arrived at the house just as the family was gathering in the breakfast-room, and in the pleasant, sunny atmosphere Hamlin's resolutions crumbled. How could he mar the pleasure of their morning meal for the old couple by blurting out his dreadful story! Portia was eagerly welcomed and caressed by her fond uncle and aunt, and Elmer's blood boiled as he watched her accepting the love which they lavished upon her. His heart felt perfectly cold toward her. None of the tenderness which, despite her perversity, would persist in filling his heart when he had seen her in the city, softened him now. He ate his breakfast with but little relish, although the

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others at the table appeared to enjoy the appetizing repast thoroughly. Aunt Annabelle, it appeared, was preparing to flit, and Evelyn was debating whether or not she should accompany her mother. The long Sunday, enlivened only by the music of the birds, the beauty of the landscape, and the quiet company of her relatives, had so wearied Mrs. Emmett that she had decided, slenderness of purse notwithstanding, to seek a fashionable watering-place at once. Margaret and little Earl were going to remain at the farm for the summer.

"Miss Margaret will be company for mother if you decide to go away for a while, Portia," remarked Donald, with a meaning glance; and Portia looked up, with a light springing into her eyes, which Hamlin was not slow to observe.

"Where do you want to go, Portia?" asked inquisitive Amy. And as Portia did not reply at once, Donald answered for her:

"Portia might like to spend a little time in the city, Amy."

The lovely color deepened in Portia's dimpled cheeks, and she looked gratitude into Donald's eyes, while Elmer clinched his hands under the table. Should he speak now? he asked himself. A look at the hard face of Aunt Anna-

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belle stayed his tongue a moment, and Evelyn appealed to him.

"Would you advise me to stay here, Mr. Hamlin?" she asked, turning a melting glance upon him, "or to go with mamma?"

"Ah—er—it would be hard to say," mumbled Elmer, absently, and Evelyn flushed angrily, while Margaret suddenly hid a smile in her teacup.

After breakfast Evelyn followed Hamlin into the hall, but he seemed oblivious of her presence and betook himself frowningly to his room, there to ponder anew upon his perplexities. After the noon meal Evelyn, dressed in a fluffy white gown, and carrying a rose-tinted parasol, again waylaid him in the hall and tried to beguile him into taking her for a walk. But when he broke away from her brusquely and passed out of the door with a stony countenance, she gave up the struggle.

"I am going with you, mamma," she announced, entering her mother's room, and with a sigh Aunt Annabelle turned from the trunk she was packing to reckon anew her scanty resources.

The mother and daughter departed the next day, and after watching them disappear down the road with Donald in his new auto-

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mobile, Portia and her aunt turned back toward the house.

"I believe I will go down and see how Agnes is to-day, Aunty," said the girl, hesitating on the doorsill. "Amy will need more clothes up here if she is going to stay longer, and I must see about it."

"Yes, do go, dear," replied Aunt Caroline. "Pack up whatever the child requires, and Donald can get the things the next time he goes down-town."

Portia looked left and right as she started down the hill an hour later. It would be better to avoid Amy, who would be sure to want to accompany her. She had proceeded for some little distance undiscovered, when suddenly she came upon an interesting group. Amy, tangled of hair and torn of dress, was bracing her feet and gripping valiantly at a rope, the other end of which was attached to a yellow and unwilling dog. Earl, also disheveled and torn, was laboring to untie from the end of a stick a bundle done up in an indescribable handkerchief.

"Just hang on to him till I can get this stick, Amy," he encouraged, breathlessly, "and then I'll pound him good."

"Children!" exclaimed the amazed Portia.

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"What are you doing? Where did you get that dog?"

"Buyed him," responded Earl. "Is n't he a splendid dog? Half of him's mine and half Amy's."

"Mr. Hamlin gave Earl a quarter not to cry 'cause his mother was going away," explained Amy, glancing across her shoulder.

"I was n't going to, anyway," maintained Earl, scornfully; "'course not, long as I did n't have to go. We bought him of Ole Peterson," he went on, evidently referring to the dog. "He was a dollar, but we owe the other seventy-five."

Portia looked at the yellow dog, which had given up his struggle with Amy and was squatting upon his haunches, looking dejectedly toward Earl's busy fingers.

"Why did n't you buy something else?" she inquired, unappreciatively.

"We had n't got to the stores when we met Ole," explained Amy. "Besides, we need a watchdog, 'cause we're going on a picnic. That's our lunch," she added, with pride. She gave a look at the watchdog, and as he appeared quietly meditative, she released the rope and sat down beside the now opened bundle. "You did n't bring nearly enough, Earl," she

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reproached. "Your handkerchief was n't half big enough."

"I know it," sighed the small man. "Tramps always use a banana handkerchief; but I have n't got one. Let's eat now."

"Oh, no," protested Amy; "it's too early. Is n't it too early, Portia?"

Two pairs of eyes were lifted to Portia's, and as she hesitated a second before deciding his momentous question, there came a sudden movement on the part of the depressed dog. Portia uttered a little cry; but before the young picnickers could interfere there had been several great gulps, and the treasured lunch had vanished down a yellow throat.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" screamed the children.

The dog sat back, blinking and evidently cheered in his spirits.

"You naughty, naughty dog!" scolded Amy, pounding with her fists upon his unresisting back.

"I'm so hungry," lamented Earl.

The dog licked his chops reminiscently, then suddenly pricked up one ear. A low, persuasive whistle sounded from a nearby thicket. The other ear went up. The whistle came again. There was a sudden yellow flash. The thicket parted, and the dog was gone.

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"Oh! Oh! It's that Ole Peterson! He's whistled our dog away! He's a stealer! He's a stealer!" shrieked Amy, in a passion, while Earl looked after the vanished dog with a sorrow and reproach too deep for words.

"Never mind, children," comforted Portia; "never mind the dog. Go back home and see what nice cookies Lizzie is making."

"Where are you going?" demanded Amy.

Portia hesitated and grew a little pink. "I am not going home yet, dear," she evaded. "You and Earl need not wait for me. Run back before Lizzie puts the cookies away."

"You are going to town," declared Amy.

Portia was silent, seeking for an evasive reply.

"I'll go with you," Amy announced, slipping her hand into Portia's; but Portia protested:

"No, no, dear; I would rather you would n't go to-day."

"You are going to see my mother?"

Again Portia was silent.

"I want to go." Tears enforced her remark this time, and Portia sat down upon the grass and brought into play all her persuasions. She wanted a quiet talk with Amy's mother about her eyes this afternoon. Amy had noth-

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ing on clean enough to wear through town to-day, but she could go to-morrow with Donald in the automobile. But Amy's tears threatened to be a downpour, until suddenly the bushes parted and Mr. Hamlin appeared. The gift of another quarter effectually dried the tears, and soon a contented Amy was wending her way, with Earl, houseward and cookyward.

"Why did n't you simply deny that you were going to her mother's?" queried Elmer, who had overheard a part of the conversation.

"But that would have been a lie!"

Elmer looked curiously down into the clear, shocked eyes. Portia laughed a little.

"Perhaps some people would consider such a thing only a harmless white lie," she said, deprecatingly; "but really, I never can accustom myself to even white lies. I can't bring myself to speak anything but the truth."

Hamlin found himself unable to respond to such a statement as this from her, and so remained silent.

"I almost believe I won't go," demurred Portia, glancing up and down the road uncertainly. "It has grown so late now."

"Why, it is n't late," assured Hamlin, glancing at his watch.

"But unless I stayed till evening, I should n't

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have much time to talk with Agnes, and I am afraid Donald won't want to come back to town to-night."

"Can't I come for you?" proposed Elmer, eagerly. "Do let me. I am sure your cousin will be too tired."

Portia laughed in friendly fashion. "If you are sure you would n't mind," she assented; and so it was arranged.

Chapter VII

PORTIA wrote the words, "We are down by the river; follow the path," on a piece of paper and pinned it upon the outside of Mrs. Ilverton's door. Her face was very sober as she linked her arm through her friend's and led the way down the path.

"Perhaps you are only looking upon the dark side of things, because you are blue and lonely, Agnes," she ventured, hopefully. "I made a mistake in taking Amy away from you."

"Indeed you did not Portia," contradicted Agnes. "It is a great relief to me to have the child away for a little while. It gives me a chance to relax. Constant effort to appear cheerful for another's sake is wearing, you know."

"Oh, Agnes! Agnes!"

"Do n't mind what I say to-night, Portia. I shall conquer my fear of the dreadful prospect before me by and by, I hope; but I confess that I have not yet become reconciled, Portia. I have not yet become reconciled."

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"But, Agnes, do n't speak so hopelessly. If it is indeed true that you are going blind, you must do something about it at once. An operation might help you. Wonderful things are accomplished by specialists."

"But specialists are very expensive, Portia, and I dare not spend the little money I have in experimenting. I must think of Amy."

"But, Agnes, your eyesight is worth more than any amount of money."

"Of course, I know that; and if I were only certain of regaining it, I would willingly part with every cent I possess. But suppose I spent all my money, and still lost my sight? I could not work; there would be nothing to live upon; and what would become of us?"

The birds twittered overhead; a tree-toad began his plaintive tune; but Portia was dumb. What, indeed, could she say?

Elmer Hamlin walked from the farm to the cottage that evening with meditative step. A possible solution of his problem was occupying his thoughts. When he had watched Portia from the shelter of the bushes, and had noted her embarrassment while trying to evade Amy's queries without telling a falsehood, the conviction had seized him that this young girl was absolutely incapable of a lie. For her to hesi-

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tate at a harmless little false statement such as would have pacified Amy, and yet to live every day of her life a lie, was impossible, he concluded. The girl must be partially deranged. Yes, dreadful though the thought was, Portia Dennison must be insane. Not dangerously so, of course, but she must be subject to periodical attacks in which she fancied herself to be Pearl Overton, and at such times she sought the city and remained until the spell left her. There was relief as well as sorrow in this thought. While it grieved him to think that the girl he loved was the victim of so dread an affliction, and while he shuddered at the thought of her danger while wandering about the city in the grip of her delusion, still his heart sang high at the thought that she was as pure and true as any man could wish his beloved to be. So deep was his meditation that he noticed nothing around him until he reached the cottage-door and read the words upon the piece of paper. Then he looked about him. The path was easy to locate, and as he began to tread it slowly, he glanced from side to side with growing delight. For a short distance the way sloped gently downward. Tall oaks, elms, and maples twisted their giant branches together high above his head, while here and there a

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silvery poplar rustled its musical leaves in the breeze. Around his feet young ferns were uncurling their delicate fronds, and violets—blue, white, and yellow—gleamed everywhere like stars. The air was full of filmy insects, and the murmur of the river grew louder and louder as he advanced, until suddenly he emerged into a comparatively clear space and saw before him its waters rippling under the rising moon. His quick glance swept the bank, and a gleam of white rewarded him. He bent his steps toward the spot, close to the edge, where Portia and Agnes were sitting. He looked with some little curiosity at Mrs. Ilverton when he was presented to her, and was surprised at seeing so frail, fair, and young a woman. Gypsy-like Amy bore not the slightest resemblance to her fragile, blond mother.

Hamlin threw himself down upon the grass and looked about with a full-drawn breath of admiration.

“What a beautiful place!” he exclaimed.

“Yes.” Agnes’s voice was wistful. “It must be very beautiful.”

“Must be! Do n’t you realize what an exquisite spot you are living in, Mrs. Ilverton?”

“I used to,” sadly, “but sometimes now I forget.”

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Elmer started guiltily and glanced at Portia. For the moment he had forgotten Mrs. Ilverton's failing sight.

"Forgive me," he begged, contritely; "what a thoughtless brute I am!"

But Agnes laughed aside his apology. "There is nothing at all to forgive," she refuted. "Why should not my eyes be mentioned?"

"There is nothing extraordinarily beautiful to be seen here anyway," affirmed Portia, casting a withering look at the repentant Hamlin. "Nothing but a very ordinary view of the river."

"Oh, but, Portia, there is so much beauty in all ordinary things. The earth, the water, the sky. Why, no day was ever so dull but I could find some beauty in it."

"Oh, I like to look at the sky, too," conceded Portia, "especially when there is a good sunset. And I love a fine view of the country, such as we get from our hill and similar places."

"You are foolish to wait for hills and sunsets, Portia," smiled Agnes. "One can not always have those. As for me, I have always looked for beauty in ordinary places and while about my ordinary tasks."

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"And have you always found it?" Hamlin asked, curiously.

"Certainly I have. I never hung out a washing without enjoying the wonderful depths of the sky each time I raised my eyes to fasten a garment to the line. I never shook a table-cloth out-of-doors without drinking in a sight of the trees and grass, and perhaps listening to a bird's song; and I never passed a window without being refreshed by a glimpse of the view outside. Oh, yes, my life has been full of beauty."

"What a delightful way of living!" said Hamlin, admiringly. "Most of us take our work and pleasure separately."

"Well," confessed Agnes, "I used to do that way, too, long ago. I would hurry while at my work, trying to get it all finished, so I could enjoy myself afterward; but I soon learned that one's work is never done, and I saw that the only way to be sure of having any enjoyment was to sandwich it in with the work. Of course, there is always a chance of a long leisure time coming, but one never can be sure."

"But the pleasures you get in that way have to be such little, no-account ones," grumbled Portia.

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"Not at all," disagreed Agnes. "A little time spent in chatting with a neighbor across the fence sometimes results in a lifelong friendship, and that is no little thing. A few moments several times a day spent with a good book or at your piano while your dishwater heats or your potatoes boil will open up a world for your imagination to riot in while you finish your tasks, and the cultivation one acquires from these sandwiched-in pleasures is no little thing."

"Oh, Agnes! Agnes!" A sudden realization of all that her friend's affliction was going to deprive her of suddenly flooded Portia, and she choked as she grasped Agnes's hand. Agnes felt the unspoken thought, and to take both her own mind and Portia's from it, she turned to Hamlin.

"Tell me about the river, won't you, please?" she begged.

"About the river?"

"Yes," wistfully, "you said it was so beautiful. Can't you describe it to me? Make me see it as you do. I can hear its beautiful voice, but everything else is dim. Not that I want to complain," she added, quickly. "Surely its voice is a river's chief charm. It sings and talks in so many different tones; now grave, now

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gay, now loud, now soft—always in a sympathetic, refreshing manner."

"Yes," agreed Elmer, "a river tries to keep one from feeling lonely. It is forever singing about the country through which it has been gliding. Talking about meadows, where wild flowers are growing, and farms, where thirsty horses are driven down to its waters to drink, while barefooted children splash and play beside them. It tells of the cattle standing knee-deep in the cool places, and of the song-sparrows singing blithely in the drooping willows that dip their branches into the quiet pools where thrushes and bluebirds are bathing. It murmurs of the catbirds building their nests in overhanging branches, and of the orioles warbling their notes of pure gladness among the treetops. It sings of mossy logs and of rainbow-tinted fishes. It breaks into musical laughter over the merry crowds of boys who search out the good swimming-holes, and it murmurs sympathetic encouragement to the patient fishermen who haunt its banks."

He paused a moment, but Agnes leaned forward breathlessly. "Yes, yes," she breathed, "go on."

"The river comes to us to-night from quiet places," he resumed, musingly; "places where

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the banks are enameled with wild flowers which bloom and fade unseen by men. Fallen leaves make thick, soft carpets on the banks, and bushes grow in tangles unmolested. The silver waters sweep and glide between their banks, passing forests of sycamores, elms, maples, and birches, with occasionally the break of a bare hill or lonely meadow. They roll and ripple onward unceasingly, laughing in the sunlight, sobbing under storms, and singing peacefully beneath the moon."

"It is moonlight now," murmured Agnes, softly.

"Yes, and the water is slipping past us gently, while in the sky the great, bright moon is rising from behind a pearl-gray cloud. Her soft light falls like a path of silver across the dancing ripples. In the water seems to be another moon, twinkling and dimpling as the little lapping waves caress her face into smiles. Dark tree-shadows gloom on the other shore, but the island just before us gleams glorified in the celestial light. The river breaks in twain at the head of the island, and the two halves gurgle merrily as they dance away on either side, hurrying, hurrying, ever onward toward the sea."

Hamlin's voice ceased, and Agnes quivered

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into a sigh. "I see it, Mr. Hamlin," she said, "and how very beautiful it is—the water!"

"Yes," he assented, "the water makes the beauty. Without it, what would the river-bed be? Nothing but an unsightly blemish upon the landscape. It makes me think—" he paused.

"Yes?" prompted Agnes, eagerly.

"It makes me think of some human experiences," he mused. "Sometimes things happen to us which tunnel great gashes in our lives. They mutilate us and cleave us to the heart. But it lies with ourselves what to do with these gashes. We can leave them as scars upon our lives, disfiguring them and hindering their usefulness, or we can allow the grace of God to flow into them like water, turning their emptiness into fullness, their ugliness into beauty, and sending its blessing throughout our whole influence, as a river blesses a landscape."

Agnes drew a deep breath. "Thank you, Mr. Hamlin," she murmured. "I thank you very much."

For a while silence brooded over the little group, then Portia turned.

"Mr. Hamlin," she asked, abruptly, "do you ever write poems?"

"Write poetry?" Hamlin's mellow laughter

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blended with the music of the river. "I? Oh, no, never, never," he replied.

"Why not?" persisted Portia, and Elmer sobered.

"I have too great a respect for poetry to write poor poems," he responded, seriously, "and I have never had inspiration enough to write good ones. I should be grateful and glad if I were called to so high a task; but as it is, I only—" he hesitated and broke off.

"You only?" prompted Agnes, interestedly.

Elmer laughed a little. "Has it ever occurred to you that the Creator makes poems?" he asked, in a reverent voice. "Instead of writing them in words, He inscribes them in lives. His poems are being lived all around us, and I like to think that occasionally He lets me help Him a little in some of His poems."

"How do you mean?" asked Agnes.

"I mean that if I am keen enough to see and sympathetic enough to understand, the Heavenly Poet can often use me as His instrument in writing a bright word or a happy line in some of the poems He is creating around me," replied Hamlin.

Chapter VIII

PORTIA and Hamlin walked home rather silently through the perfumed night. Many thoughts struggled together in the young girl's mind, and Hamlin was occupied with reflections of his own. Occasionally he glanced almost curiously down at the golden-brown head below his shoulder. He was wondering at himself. What had come over him, that he should be so calm under circumstances which, according to all reason, should be intoxicating him with their sweetness. The girl of his love was beside him, the witchery of a perfect night was around them, and they were alone. Once Portia stumbled slightly over an uneven place in the road, and he put his hand through her arm and drew her close to his side, and his wondering grew. A slight thrill tingled through him, it is true, but compared to the madness of desire, the agony of delight which had overwhelmed him at the proximity of Pearl in the city library, it was as nothing. Why should he have loved her more in the prosaic daylight en-

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vironment of the city than here in the romantic surroundings of nature?" he asked himself. Suddenly she spoke.

"Mr. Hamlin, do you know any doctors in the city?" she asked.

"Doctors?" Sweet woodsy odors floated about them as they brushed against the bushes, and drowsy night-noises made themselves heard. Elmer's eyes were upon the pale, winding road, and his voice was absent.

"Yes, doctors," repeated Portia, impatiently. "Good doctors. Specialists."

Elmer aroused himself and looked kindly down into the upturned eyes.

"Certainly I do," he answered.

He forbore to suggest that, spending as much time in the city as he knew her to have done, she also ought to know of some physicians. No doubt her insane visits to the city were absolutely forgotten in her sane intervals, he reflected, compassionately.

"Do you know of any one who could examine Mrs. Ilverton's eyes?" queried Portia.

Hamlin reflected a moment. Various physicians flitted through his mind, and a happy thought occurred to him. If a doctor were to be brought from the city to see Mrs. Ilverton, could he not be requested, at the same time,

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to study Portia, unsuspected by her, and to give his opinion as to the state of her mind?

"I suppose specialists are very expensive, though," Portia was pursuing. "Maybe an ordinary doctor would do if he were a very good one. If some one who knew could assure Agnes that she could be cured, she would willingly go to a specialist for treatment, or have an operation, or do anything, I am sure."

"I have a number of excellent physicians among my friends," averred Hamlin. "Shall I bring one up with me some day?"

"Oh, do," cried Portia, eagerly. "I—I will see that he is paid for the visit."

Uncle Henry and Aunt Caroline were still upon the veranda when Elmer and Portia reached the house. Donald, who had been prowling restlessly about in the shrubbery, appeared suddenly in the moonlight and drew Portia's hand through his arm jealously. Mr. Dennison signified his desire to go in; so Hamlin carefully propelled the wheel-chair through the door and along the hall to the invalid's room. The others entered the house also, and when Elmer returned to the living-room he found Portia telling her aunt and Donald about the state of Mrs. Ilverton's eyes.

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"We must keep Amy here a while longer," she was remarking. "Donald, would you mind driving down to-morrow for a satchel of her clothes that I—"

The words suddenly died upon her lips. A deathly whiteness overspread her countenance, and her eyes grew black with fright.

"Portia! Portia! What is it?"

The two men sprang forward simultaneously, and, trembling with terror, Portia flung herself upon Donald's arm.

"The face! The window!" she gasped, hiding her eyes.

They all whirled toward the window Portia had been facing, but nothing unusual met their gaze. Elmer strode across the room and peered out into the moonlight, while Aunt Caroline came forward, saying soothingly:

"Did you fancy you saw a face at the window, darling?"

"There is no one here," called Hamlin, assuringly.

But Portia insisted. Releasing Donald's arm, and pushing the hair from her brow with two trembling hands, she shuddered. "There was some one. He—she—Oh, it beckoned to me."

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Nervous tremors again shook her form, and she buried her face in Aunt Caroline's neck. Donald and Elmer glanced at each other.

"You are tired and nervous, dear, and fancied you saw something," comforted Aunt Caroline, patting her shoulder.

But Portia shook her head.

"What kind of a face was it?" questioned Donald. "Was it a man's?"

Portia shuddered again. "Oh, it was dreadful," she quavered; "hair down all over—black—and—and—Oh, dreadful!"

"I'll go out and search," declared Donald, and Elmer, with a worried glance at Portia, moved toward the door also.

"Come up to bed, dearest," advised Aunt Caroline. "Surely there is nothing to fear. Even if some one did peep into our window, he probably meant no harm. It may have been a boy playing a trick. Perhaps the combined effects of moonlight and shadow caused the dreadful appearance that shocked you. Try not to think of it any more, darling."

Thus cheering the trembling girl, she led her upstairs, and did not leave her until at last the overwrought nerves were calmed and Portia was ready to laugh at her own fears.

Donald and Elmer having thoroughly

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searched the shrubbery and scrutinized the premises, at length sought the house again.

"It was probably only a fancy on Miss Dennison's part," suggested Hamlin, with troubled eyes.

"But Portia is not addicted to fancies," objected Donald. "She is always so sane and reasonable. She probably did see somebody; but since he is nowhere about now, we may as well turn in. It was a tramp, likely."

But Hamlin felt restless and worried. Declining Donald's invitation into the house with him, he promised to lock up for the night himself, and remained moodily upon the porch, while Donald climbed the stairs to his room. Sane! Donald considered Portia sane and reasonable! A heavy sigh broke from Elmer's lips. What a shock the knowledge of Portia's insanity was going to be to all these good people! That the face at the window was only a hallucination on her part, he was now convinced. No doubt she was becoming more and more deranged daily. What should he do? It would be painful to break the news to her family. Perhaps a doctor could do so better than he. Yes, undoubtedly the better plan would be to bring a first-class physician to Oakdale at once, under pretext of Mrs. Ilverton's

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distress, and have him take the matter up. A sparkling something under a hydrangea-bush kept tantalizing his eyes, and rising absently, he approached the place. Still busy with his thoughts, he stooped and put out his hand. When he arose, a pocketbook lay in his palm. It was a black purse with a metal clasp which caught the pale moonbeams and cast them back into his eyes in silvery light. A startled ejaculation broke from him. The bush was near the window through which Portia had seen the face. He opened the purse. A few dimes and the half of a railroad ticket were within. Hamlin's heart sank like lead. A return-ticket to the city! What did it mean? Was the face no hallucination, then? Had some one come from the city in search of the beautiful girl who, in deranged moments, was wont to sojourn there? What associations may she not have formed? What complications might she not be weaving around herself? Hamlin, unable to force himself into the house, wandered till dawn about the yard.

In the meantime Portia was restless in her bed. Sleep refused to visit her eyelids. It was not only the weird, wild face she had seen at the window, and the beckoning hand, that haunted her. Her healthy young nerves had

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quickly recovered their normal tone under Aunt Caroline's kindly ministrations, and although she knew she was not mistaken in what she had seen, she dismissed the matter from her mind. But the thought of Agnes Ilverton was not so easily banished. The pathetic expression in the gentle eyes, out of which sight was so surely fading, haunted her, and over and over again she heard the plaint, "I am not yet reconciled, Portia; I am not yet reconciled." She turned restlessly upon her pillow. Almost it seemed that the silvery river was flowing again before her eyes, its musical murmur sounding in her ears. Upon the bank of the moonlit stream that night there had come to her, clearly and unmistakably, a disheartening conviction. One of her heart's desires was going to be denied her. She would never be a writer of poems. Her eyes had been upon the white-tipped ripples and Hamlin's voice had been in her ears when the realization smote her. His beautiful description of the water had flowed in and out of her consciousness like music while she was battling with the disappointing revelation, and as she recalled the poignant pain of those moments she raised herself in her bed and threw back the sheet impatiently. The moonlight streamed across the floor in a broad, white

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beam; and stepping out into it, she went to the window. The night was almost windless. The tree-leaves dappled the grass with delicate shadows; the trunks sent long shafts of black across the green. How beautiful it was! Portia sank down upon the floor and looked up at the pearly clouds that drifted about the blue of the sky. What was it Mr. Hamlin had said about poetry? That one could help God in making His poems? The brown eyes were wide and reverent as they gazed upward through the spacious, solemn night. God's poems? His poems were people, according to Elmer Hamlin; people like—like—perhaps like Uncle Henry. A conception of the patient, beautiful life of her uncle as it must appear in the sight of God came suddenly to her. Yes, surely, upon the pages of Uncle Henry's days and months and years the great God was writing a poem, touching and beautiful. And there was Aunt Caroline, also, Portia's thoughts ran on. Was not her trusting, helpful life another poem, the meter of which was so even, the rhythm so true, and the message so sweet that all who were privileged to read it must be uplifted and blessed? A snowy moth fluttered in and out among the vines around Portia's window, and as she gently extended her hand it

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settled for a moment upon her finger, where it poised, fanning its downy wings to and fro in luxurious contentment. And Agnes Ilverton's life, Portia's thoughts ran on. The moth sailed lightly away, and Portia's eyes followed it absently as a vision of Agnes's life arose before her. Agnes, gentle and patient throughout a girlhood of deprivation and toil; Agnes, happy for a pathetically short period in the love and protection of her husband; Agnes, patient and brave in sorrow, working to support her child; Agnes, now battling for courage to meet an affliction appalling in its blackness.

Portia drew a sobbing breath. Ah, yes, Agnes's life was a poem of pathos and beauty. One of God's poems in the making. And what would the end of it be? Was it indeed true that human beings could help God? Portia's quickening heartbeats sent a flush of color across her cheeks because who could help Him so well in this poem as she herself? She, the friend whom Agnes loved. Was this, then, what Elmer Hamlin meant? The sweetness of the thought filtered down through her heart, cooling with its balm the sore places made by the thought that never in this world would songs written by her bless the world. "It is better to help God," she whispered to the night. "His work is sure

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to be good, and if He will let me write little words here and little lines there in His human poems, I shall be satisfied and grateful even though I never see a line of mine in print. Perhaps in heaven He will show me some places in His poems where I have helped." And, smiling, she crept back to bed.

Chapter IX

SO keen was Hamlin's anxiety that, despite his sleepless night, he was early at breakfast the next morning. Portia's rosy, smiling face puzzled him. He had expected to see her looking pale and worried. In no wise cheered by her fresh appearance, which seemed to him unnatural in view of her fright of the night before, he was restless whenever she was out of his sight. What might she not take an insane fancy to do at any moment? he asked himself; and who might be lurking about the premises to waylay her? He found it quite impossible to keep her in sight when, after breakfast, she began to move about the house in the performance of her morning tasks. Finally he betook himself to his own room, and there endeavored to fix his attention upon his neglected literary work. The sight of his almost untouched manuscript spurred him to action, and despite his disinclination, he seated himself at his desk and applied himself to his work for a couple of hours. At the end of that time he arose restlessly. The

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house seemed unnaturally quiet. No snatches of song floated up the stairs; no talking was heard, no laughter. He hastened downstairs and searched all the rooms. No one was in sight. He started for the door, his anxiety growing intense; but in the front hall he encountered Aunt Caroline. She was coming from the garden, her hands filled with purple lilacs.

"Where is Portia," he demanded, without preface.

"Portia has gone to a picnic," was the calm reply.

"A picnic!"

"Yes. Some of the young people in town invited her last week. She didn't intend to go at first; so Margaret took the children and went without her; but they had no sooner gone than Portia changed her mind and went too."

Smiling and content, Aunt Caroline went on through the hall; but Hamlin was not so satisfied. Fears of many kinds beset him. That Portia had gone to the picnic he very much doubted. It seemed far more likely to him that she had gone to the city. Hastily glancing at his watch, he made a dash for his hat and went down the hill on a run. A train was due in ten minutes. He arrived at the depot hot

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and panting, just in time to leap aboard the last platform, where he stood clutching the rail while the train pulled out of town. Had he made a mistake? he wondered. If Portia had not gone to the city he would do more good by remaining in the village. If the possessor of the evil face which had peered through the window the night before were still in the vicinity, what might not happen before his return? But he shook his broad shoulders impatiently. No doubt Portia was on the train. He walked through the cars, looking anxiously each way; but he failed to discover her. Feverishly he traversed each aisle again and again, peering so intently into each female face that indignant glances began to be cast at him from ladies' eyes. Convinced at last that the one he sought was indeed not upon the train, he flung himself into a seat and gloomed out of the window.

"Well, at any rate," he consoled himself at last, "I can make use of this trip to consult a physician about Pearl's mind." And so he gave himself up to planning.

It was noon when he reached his destination, and after a lunch at his club he located, by telephone, his friend, Dr. Foster. Descending, then, to the street, he glanced somewhat

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wishfully in the direction of the library branch, where he was accustomed to seeing Pearl Overton. But no, he decided, it would only waste time to go there to-day, since she only worked there Saturdays. He resisted, likewise, an inclination to walk past the apartment house where he had once seen the girl of his love upon the steps.

"The best thing for me to do is to see the doctor at once, and then return on the first train to Oakdale. I do n't believe Pearl came to the city at all to-day—or Portia, I should say. I must accustom myself to her real name."

He took a car to the hospital where Dr. Foster was reported to be. Making known his errand at the door, he was ushered into a waiting-room and assured that Dr. Foster would be notified of his presence as soon as his visit to a patient on the third floor was finished. Elmer fidgeted nervously about the stiff waiting-room. He sat in one chair, and then another, with restless impatience. He fingered all the magazines, and then wandered to the window. Suddenly he started and turned toward the door, while every drop of his blood leaped madly. A familiar musical laugh had rippled through the corridor.

"It is delightful to hear that they are ex-

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pecting me so eagerly," he heard a girlish voice say. "I will run up by myself, thank you; you need not trouble to come."

Hamlin drew himself out of his incredulity with a jerk and rushed into the hall. A slender figure was tripping up the stairway, and with mingled amazement and relief he mounted swiftly after it. He kept the young girl in sight until she passed down the corridor of the third floor and disappeared through a door at the end. A glad medley of childish voices arose to greet her, and as Elmer went down the hall he heard the name of "Pearl" repeated over and over in accents of joy and affection. Looking through the door, he saw the eagerly-welcomed visitor pass from one little white bed to another, bestowing loving greetings upon pale-faced little children who lay upon the cots. The children's ward was a sunny, cheerful apartment. Pictures adorned the walls, and the floor was polished like a mirror. The snowy beds and cribs were placed in pleasant corners and near open windows, and the children laid where they could look at one another, although daintily-tinted screens were numerous and handy. There were several rocking-chairs in the room, and in one of these the visitor presently seated herself.

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"Now, nurse," she said, suggestively, and the white-capped attendant, evidently knowing what was desired, carefully lifted a frail little form and placed it in the waiting arms.

"Shall you be here for some little time, Miss Overton?" queried the nurse, hopefully.

"Probably an hour," was the reply; but a chorus of childish voices began to clamor:

"Longer, longer, Pearl."

"Stay all afternoon," begged a little girl who was stretched upon her back, two heavy, iron weights hanging down from the foot of her bed, telling a pitiful story.

"Stay as long as you can," reasonably urged a big-eyed, hunchback boy, who was sitting on the floor, his useless legs curled under him.

The little girl in the visitor's lap only smiled wistfully and put a blue-veined hand up to the beautiful face above her.

"Go on out if you want to, nurse," said the young lady, kindly, "I will take care of the children till you come back."

Hamlin did not even observe the curious glance of the nurse as she passed him, so absorbed was he in the picture before him.

"Tell us a story, Pearl, please," begged a little boy with a broken leg.

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"No, a song first," demanded the child in the visitor's lap.

"Vena has the right to choose," ruled the hunchback boy judicially, "because Pearl is her sister."

A radiant light flashed into the face of little Vena. She raised her head with sudden strength and nestled its red-gold curls against the breast of her "sister."

"Oh, Pearl, I think of you all day and all night," she averred, with unchildlike intensity. "I've got some one of my very own now, and I'm not different from all the rest."

The loving arms pressed the child closer, but a skeptical little voice proceeded from the boy with the broken leg:

"It's only pretending, though; and after all, pretending doesn't make it true."

"The light faded out of the sensitive little countenance, and the lips began to quiver; but again the hunchback ruled:

"Sure it's true. They're adopted, and adopting's true."

"Certainly," declared Vena's "sister," decidedly, "we adopted each other the last day I was here. You all heard us. So now I belong to little Vena, and little Vena belongs to me. What shall sister sing, darling?"

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Elmer turned away from the door with unwonted tears smarting in his eyes. Oh, the dearness of her, and the sweetness! How he loved her! When the first notes of her song floated out to him he leaned against the window-casing and closed his eyes to listen. Merry, lilting, cheerful, and childish were the songs she sang, and at times weak little voices joined in with hers, and often happy laughter blended with the music. After a time it ceased, and Hamlin began to pace up and down the long corridor thoughtfully. His perplexities had time to swoop down upon him again, and he was just trying to decide whether to remain where he was and confront Portia, or to descend to the waiting-room again and institute inquiries for Dr. Foster, when a door opened and the doctor himself appeared.

"Hello, there, Hamlin!" he exclaimed.
"What brings you here?"

"I came to see you." Elmer flushed with something of embarrassment.

The doctor turned his head. The sweet-singing voice was floating out into the corridor again.

"Miss Overton must be visiting the children to-day," remarked the doctor, in a satisfied tone.

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"Do you know Miss Overton?" inquired Elmer, quickly.

"Know Miss Overton? To be sure I do. I have met her often here at the hospital. She visits the children regularly. They all adore her, and her visits are of more benefit than medicine to them; especially to one little waif who was found one morning upon the hospital doorstep, packed in a basket—poor, abandoned little Vena."

"Ah!" Elmer found it difficult to proceed with his story. "I know Miss Overton, too," he affirmed, "only I know her by a different name—or, that is, I know her by both her names; of course, but—"

"What!"

"Now, look here, Doctor, I came to town purposely to see you to-day—or, that is, I came to look after her, too; only—"

The doctor laughed. "What is the matter with you, Hamlin," he asked, banteringly; "are you crazy?"

"No, I am not; but, Doctor, I hate to say it; but something is wrong with Miss Overton's mind. Now, now," raising a protesting hand, "just let me explain before you speak. I have known this young lady as Pearl Overton here in the city, just as you know her; but on a farm

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near Oakdale lives this same young lady, only there she calls herself Portia Dennison—”

“Nonsense! How can she live at Oakdale and here at the same time?”

Striving to explain himself intelligibly, Hamlin poured out his whole story, and the doctor listened attentively, although he scoffed at the end.

“Just a case of remarkable resemblance, old boy,” he insisted. “Oh, yes, yes; I ’ll come down, certainly. Probably I can get around to it some day next week. By the way, here comes Miss Overton now.”

Throwing a cordial salutation toward the approaching girl, Dr. Foster passed down the stairs, and Hamlin turned somewhat nervously, wondering how Portia would receive him. The young girl wore a hesitating, half-timid air, and her appealing smile was so winsome, so irresistible that Elmer suddenly lost control of himself.

“Pearl! Pearl!” he cried, passionately, springing forward. “My darling Pearl, how I love you!”

The lovelight in the brown eyes responded radiantly, the slender form yielded to his arms, and for awhile Paradise was experienced.

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Presently the two lovers left the building, and, walking upon air, proceeded up the street. The sweet old story occupied them to the exclusion of all other topics; and when at last the apartment house was reached, Hamlin put his foot upon the first step without thinking. But the girl stayed him.

"I hardly believe I will ask you in to-day," she hesitated, "mother is n't very well."

Elmer's troubles flooded back with a rush. He looked up at the house fearfully. With whom was his beloved staying in this place? How could he leave her here?

"Darling," he pleaded, earnestly, "now that you know I love you, surely you will tell me everything frankly. Are you not really Portia Dennison?"

Dismay filled the big, brown eyes. Tears arose, and she gazed at him distressedly.

"Tell me, dearest," the lover entreated, "do you not remember the farm and Uncle Henry and Aunt Caroline?"

The poor girl bit her lip to still its trembling, and a big tear rolled down her cheek. Elmer, distressed at the sight, hastily sought his handkerchief to dry the tear. In producing the handkerchief he let fall to the sidewalk the

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purse he had found the night before. She uttered a little exclamation as he stooped and picked it up.

"My purse!" she exclaimed, in surprise.

"*Your* purse!"

"Yes, I was wondering where it was."

Elmer stared at her in perplexity. "Perhaps you dropped it on our walk home last night," he pondered, "and yet we did n't come past that bush. Portia, dear, let me take you home. You ought not to stay here to-night."

Profound sadness shadowed the beautiful face at the word "Portia." A mist of tears again dimmed the brown eyes. She turned swiftly and ran up the steps.

"Good-bye!" she murmured, her hand on the knob, and then she disappeared.

Chapter X

IT was about eight o'clock when Hamlin arrived at the farmhouse. He was not expecting to see Portia there. No doubt, he told himself, he should hear some story of her having remained for the night with Mrs. Ilverton. But the first person who met his sight was Portia. She was sitting, clad in a thin, cool dress, upon the steps, and the children were playing around her. A sigh of mingled relief and sorrow came from Elmer's perplexed breast. She must have come home on the other side of the river, he reflected. He wondered how much of the afternoon's events she remembered, and he gazed with suspended breath at her as he paused at the foot of the steps. The children sprang to meet him with shouts of delight, and Aunt Caroline arose from her seat beside her husband's chair with a concerned inquiry about his supper; but Portia's nod was indifferent, and her smile was merely polite. No blush testified to a remembrance of the love-making of the afternoon. There was no droop-

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ing of the eyes, no tender shyness such as his heart yearned to see. He followed Aunt Caroline into the house dejectedly, and the absent-minded attention which he gave to the tempting repast she spread before him was far less than the appetizing viands deserved. When he had finished he joined the family upon the porch. The air was sultry and oppressive. Great thunderheads loomed in the sky, and only an occasional star twinkled out. Margaret and Donald had now joined the group, and all the young people were talking with Uncle Henry about the allegory of "The Inn by the Sea."

"I wish I could find some of those pearls," remarked Earl, fervently. He was seated on the broad arm of the invalid-chair, and his blue eyes were wide as they gazed across at Amy, who was perched on the opposite arm.

"And string them upon a blue ribbon," amplified the little girl, with equal earnestness.

"What is this about pearls?" queried Hamlin, dropping down beside Portia on the step. "I know one beautiful Pearl," he added, hopefully gazing deeply into her clear eyes. But her gaze was tranquil and uncomprehending.

"Uncle Henry has been telling us more about the travelers who stopped at the Inn by the Sea," she replied. "It seems that during

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their day there, they were all expected to trim their sea-faring garments with pearls, which they were to search for and find in the inn."

"And string them upon a blue ribbon," interpolated Amy, true little daughter of Eve.

"The pearls were good deeds, I surmise, father?" said Donald, questioningly.

"But the ribbon?" groped Margaret.

"Simplicity," explained the old gentleman.

"But deeds, no matter how pure and beautiful they may be, will not insure one a safe journey across the great sea, will they, father?" demurred Aunt Caroline.

"To be sure they will not, dear wife," agreed Mr. Dennison. "The pearls were only meant to fringe the robes. Some of the travellers made the mistake of substituting the fringe for the robe, and, in order to secure enough material, used imitation pearls, which would melt as soon as the sea-breezes touched them. The only robe which would safely protect the traveler on the journey was the robe of Righteousness of the King's Son."

"But since the King loves to see the pearls, how I wish I could trim my robe with some!" yearned Portia. "Oh, Uncle Henry, how strange it all is! It is hard for me to look upon this world as only an inn."

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"It is for me, too," declared Margaret. "It seems like a place I shall live on in for ever and ever. Well, at any rate, Portia, it is not much more than morning with you and me yet. We shall have plenty of time to trim our garments."

"You can not be sure of that, dear child," corrected Uncle Henry. "The walls of the inn in the vision were honeycombed with narrow passages leading down to the sea. At every hour of the day messengers were arriving to call the travelers to their great journey, and sometimes those who had been at the inn for only a few hours were the ones to be sent for first."

"Then it behooves us to turn our minds to pearls at once," affirmed Portia, straightening up energetically. "Oh, Donald!" She turned her face up to the young man who leaned against the pillar at her back. Margaret claimed Elmer's attention for a moment, and Portia beckoned Donald to stoop. "Don, can't I find some great deed to do?" she breathed.

"Think of the beautiful poems waiting to be written by you," he whispered; but she shook her head.

"No, no, Donald," she replied: "I have had to give that dream up. I'll tell you about

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it some time. But surely there are other great things to do, Don."

Amy fell off from her perch at this juncture, creating a diversion which broke up the group. Low mutterings of thunder had been sounding from time to time, and now a jagged streak of lightning flashed through the sky.

"Oh, come, Amy; jump up quick!" cried Earl seizing the little girl's arm in excitement. "Maybe we can see the angels."

"What?" wondered Amy, bewildered.

"Up there," explained Earl, his blue eyes scanning the heavens anxiously. "There, there it goes again! A great big crack! If only I could look quick enough, I could see into heaven; but I never know where the crack is going to come."

"Oh, can you see into heaven through the lightning?" marveled Amy. "I never knew it."

Her black eyes turned skyward with his blue ones, and he continued to instruct her. "Why, of course. Do n't you always see the golden light falling through? That 's from the streets, you know. It would be easy enough to see if the floor did n't go shut so quick. And it makes such a big noise shutting."

"That 's thunder," commented Amy, lowering her eyes for a minute.

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"'Course it has to have a name. There; now you missed that chance!"

"Children, come in; it's commencing to rain." And Margaret drew the two reluctant little figures to the door.

Donald wheeled his father's chair into the house, and Elmer detained Portia a moment as she arose.

"You did n't take your purse this afternoon, after all," he said, holding out the pocketbook. "Will you have it now?"

Portia looked at it in surprise. "My purse?" she repeated. "Oh, no, Mr. Hamlin, that is not mine. I never saw it before."

Portia awoke a little later than usual the next morning, and upon descending to the kitchen she found Margaret stepping lightly about the room assisting Lizzie with the breakfast.

"Oh, Margaret!" Portia exclaimed, "I am ashamed to be so late. Do n't do any more of my work. Go out-doors and look at the beautiful morning."

"I can see that from here," laughed Margaret. "In fact, it is pouring in through all the doors and windows. Such a morning will not be ignored. Go out yourself."

"There's an old settin' hen that you'd bet-

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ter look after soon's you can," volunteered Lizzie.

"Setting hen?" repeated Portia, anxiously.
"Oh, Lizzie! Which one?"

The fowls were Portia's. All the care of them devolved upon her shoulders, and the "egg money" went toward the swelling of her modest bank account.

"There are three hens setting already," she frowned, thoughtfully. "What is the matter, Lizzie? Has one deserted her nest?"

"'Nother wants to set."

"Oh, well," relieved, "she may."

"But she wants t' other one's nest."

"What do you mean, Lizzie?"

But Lizzie only chuckled. "Better go out and settle her," she advised. "She's a-pickin' the black hen's eyes out."

Portia hurried to the poultry yard to investigate, and there Donald discovered her half an hour later. Her face was red, and she was panting from exertion. In her arms struggled a large and protesting white hen.

"Good morning, Portia!" called Donald, cheerily. "What are you doing to the hen?"

"Oh, Donald!" she cried, in exasperation.
"This hen!"

"Seems to be a pretty good hen."

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"Good! If you could see the feathers she has pulled out of the black setting hen's head! Horrid thing!"

Giving the offender a little shake, her hold upon it loosened a trifle, and the hen, with a squawk, fluttered to the ground, where it immediately ran for the hen-house door.

"Now, there she goes again," despaired Portia. "Is anything in the world as provoking as a hen!"

She flew to the door of the hen-house, and Donald, who followed as quickly as possible, arrived just in time to see her snatch the white hen from a nest on the floor upon which was sitting a ruffled black hen with a bleeding head. Donald laughed.

"She wants that nest; that is all," he observed.

"Well, she can't have it; can she?" snapped Portia. The flapping white wings that struck her face, and the sharp claws that tore her hands were not soothing to her temper. She flung the obstinate bird out into the yard, and Donald considered a minute.

"It may be only this corner that her heart is set on," he deliberated. "I might draw the nest-box along and put another in its place. Here, get out of that!"

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He grappled a moment with the incensed white fowl, which had returned and was lunging angrily at the patient sitter, striving with beak, legs, and wings to oust her from her nest.

"Now hold her for just a minute, Portia," requested Donald, handing her up to the girl.

With quick movements he pulled aside the box containing the scolding black hen, put in its place a new box, which he hastily lined with hay, and threw into it a couple of china nest-eggs.

"Now let her go," he directed, and with the first loosening of Portia's clasp the squawking white hen scrambled with all speed into the new nest, where she nestled the china eggs under her with contented clucks.

"Well," commented the harassed Portia, with emphasis, "I can tell you, Donald Dennison, that I have a very low opinion of hens!"

Donald laughed and drew her out into the sunshine again. The earth was sparkling after its night's bath. Diamonds tipped every grass-blade, and the newly-washed leaves glistened in the morning-light.

"The hen is a noble bird," defended Donald.

"Humph! As noble as an eagle, I presume," sarcastically.

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"You have hit it exactly. A hen is as good as an eagle any day, and twice as useful."

"Don, how absurd! Suppose there was an eagle in that yard. Would it be acting like that silly white hen?"

"It would probably be beating out its life on the wires trying to escape."

"Of course," eagerly; "that proves its nobility. It longs to soar."

"Yes, and who profits by its soaring? It is useful as an emblem, and stuffed, is interesting in a museum; but for genuine usefulness to the world the hen scores every time. Look at the eggs the humble hens give us every day. Hens may not be very good at soaring, but I'd give more for a flock of them than for a flock of eagles."

"Well, since you are going to talk like that, I do n't believe I will tell you what—what I have decided to—to make my life-work while I stay in—in this old inn."

Portia's eyes were becoming shy, and yet wistful, and her voice hesitated and faltered. Donald drew her underneath the morning-glory vines and took both her hands in his.

"Tell me, little Portia," he begged, softly. "You are always going to tell me everything, are n't you?"

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The girl looked up into the loving eyes and acquiesced.

"It would take the pleasure out of everything if I could n't," she acknowledged. "Well, Don, I am going to be an artist."

If a twinkle crept into Donald's dark eyes, it passed unnoticed, since Portia was now intent upon her explanation.

"I am going to use all the money I have to pay a doctor to cure Agnes's eyes," she informed him, gravely. "But I am going to keep in my heart the ambition to be a great artist. Perhaps something will happen, so I can go away and study some time, and in the meantime I shall sketch and paint things here at home."

Donald nodded with great approval. "I will make you an easel," he offered.

Portia beamed. "You do want me to be an artist, then, Don; do n't you?" she said, gladly.

Donald drew her closer. His dark head bent until it touched the golden-brown one.

"Be anything and everything you wish, my darling," he whispered, "only be mine."

The maple-tree shook its leaves with a ripple of joy, and the wrens looked down from their home in the vines with twitters of hearty approval, for Portia did not repulse him.

Chapter XI

DR. FOSTER sprang from the train with business-like alacrity. Oakdale presented a charming picture to the eye that morning; but Dr. Foster spared no moments for admiration. True, he sniffed the invigorating ozone appreciatively as he trod the winding hill-road to the farm, and he noted approvingly the promising appearance of the crops as he gained the brow of the hill; but his mind was busied with professional anticipation, over the phases of insanity as they would probably appear in the case of Pearl Overton.

The house came into view; he entered the grounds, and then suddenly halted. Along the grassy path tripped Portia, just as she had appeared on the day of Hamlin's arrival. In her hand was the same tin pail, and her lips and eyes were smiling. The doctor had time for a long keen look before she observed him; then he pressed forward and accosted her.

"Good morning, Miss Overton."

Portia halted and faced around in surprise.

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"A pleasant morning," pursued the doctor, his keen eyes moving, as had Elmer's done before him, over each detail of the charming face.

Portia flushed angrily under the gaze, and with a cold bow turned to resume her way.

"Is that Mr. Dennison's residence?" queried the doctor.

"It is."

"Pardon me, Miss Overton; but are n't you going to recognize me, and can you tell me where to look for Elmer Hamlin?"

Portia turned with blazing cheeks. "I have never met you before," she informed him, "and I do not know where Mr. Hamlin is. Another thing," she added, coming a step nearer, with angry eyes, "I dislike this mistake which Mr. Hamlin has several times made in my name, and which you have now made as well. My name is Portia Dennison."

"Perhaps, then, you have a sister named Pearl?" ventured Foster, pacifically.

"I have no sisters."

"Ah, a cousin, perhaps?"

"I have no cousins," she frowned.

Despite her plain distaste for his catechizing, the doctor was about to propound another question when the conversation was violently interrupted by two small, clamoring persons.

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"Let me carry the lemonade, Portia!" cried Amy, rushing pell-mell down the path.

"No, no! Let me; let me!" besought Earl, following closely upon her heels.

But Portia held the pail above their reach.

"No, indeed," she refused; "you might spill it, and besides you know what happened the last time I let you take it."

"Amy drank it," accused Earl, with Adam-like promptness.

"Oh, what a story! You drank half of it yourself," retorted Amy; "and besides," virtuously, "we left a big mouthful for Donald, anyway."

But Portia had taken advantage of their little colloquy to slip unnoticed under a wire fence, and was now moving rapidly along her way to the field. The children, therefore, turned their attention to the stranger and gazed at him with round-eyed curiosity. He had dropped upon a boulder, where he sat gazing after Portia, lost in a brown study. The children waited a reasonable time for him to become conscious of their presence, and then began to make advances.

"Hello!" began Amy, politely.

No response.

"Hello!" repeated Earl.

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Again no response.

The children looked at one another in surprise. Not a flicker of the stranger's eyelashes betrayed that he had heard them. Could he be deaf?

"Say it louder," advised the boy.

Amy inflated her lungs and obeyed.

"Hello, man!" she shouted, at the top of her voice.

This time the doctor did stir a trifle. His absent eyes came around to the children, and his hand went to his pocket mechanically. Drawing out a handful of peppermint candies, he held them out to Amy; then his eyes dropped to the ground, and he became blind to their existence again.

"Thank you!" said Amy, politely; but evidently her voice was not heard.

"Prob'ly some of 'em are for me," remarked Earl.

"Yes, of course," Amy assented, generously; "but first he's got to be thanked. You do it, Earl. Yell loud."

Thus adjured, Earl braced his feet, opened his mouth, and roared out a "Thank you" that turned his pink face crimson. The doctor raised surprised eyes, smiled, and waved his hand in dismissal.

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"He wants us to go," commented Amy.

"Well, let's go up to the house," proposed Earl, "I want a drink."

"I wonder if he's dumb, too," pondered Amy, a few minutes later, as she let the tin dipper drop back into the water-pail.

Earl's blue eyes regarded her interestedly across the dipper, which he lifted, dripping, to his lips; but he was too busy to answer.

"He did n't say a single word," Amy continued, thoughtfully.

"Who are you talking about?" inquired Margaret, who was making pastry at the kitchen-table.

Margaret Adams was blossoming like a rose in the pleasant farmhouse, surrounded by the quiet country, which she loved. She had taken upon herself a share of the housework, and Lizzie Smith had returned to Donald's place.

"There's a poor, deaf man out in the yard," informed Amy. "Just the nicest man! He gave me these," exhibiting the peppermints.

"Prob'ly some of 'em's for me," reminded Earl, dropping the dipper.

"A deaf man? How very sad! And poor, also, did you say? Do you mean that he is a tramp, Amy?"

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But Amy was dividing the peppermints—a task which absorbed all her attention.

"Can't the poor man hear anything?" asked Margaret, and Earl answered:

"Oh, yes, if you yell just as loud as you possibly can. Oh, Amy, here he comes. Come on, let's go meet him. We're 'quainted with him now."

The children ran out, on friendly thoughts intent, and a little later Margaret's sympathetic eyes were lifted to behold Dr. Foster as, escorted by a small guide on either hand, he entered the kitchen. The doctor looked with quick admiration at the charming girl who stood at the table. Her blue gingham gown was so neat, her hair so smooth, and her apron so white. He glanced around the spotless kitchen and at the pastry, with which her plump hands were busy, and then he looked again into the dark eyes, which were so wondrously soft and kind. He was about to explain his presence to her, when she spoke.

"Draw out Aunt Caroline's rocker for him, Amy," she directed; "and, Earl, get a glass and offer him a drink of water. I must have misunderstood you, Amy; I thought you said he was a tramp."

The doctor stared in surprise, and as he

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hesitated a moment, uncertain what to say, Amy pulled him into a chair, and he saw Earl advancing toward him, bearing the tin dipper so full of water that with every step it splashed upon the floor. The velvety, dark eyes of the girl were still upon him.

"Poor, poor man!" sorrowed Margaret, aloud. "How very sad! If he were a tramp it would not be half so pitiful. But this splendid, handsome man! Why, children, he is the handsomest man I ever saw in my life."

The doctor sprang to his feet in an agony. His face flamed crimson with embarrassment.

"I—I—" he stammered. "There is surely some mistake. I—"

But Margaret's eyes had changed. Wide and horrified they stared for a second into the doctor's "handsome" face," then the rolling-pin crashed to the floor, and she fled like a deer from the room.

"He can talk," cried Amy, in great delight. "Oh, Earl, are n't you glad he can talk?"

"Talk! Why should n't I talk, young lady?" demanded the doctor, suspicion and indignation rising together in his breast.

"Can you hear, too?" gasped Amy.

"Hear! See here, you young rascals, what did you tell that young lady about me?"

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"Only that you could n't hear," replied Amy, guilelessly.

"You were deaf as a post out-doors," reminded Earl.

The doctor was divided between laughter and regret. The look in Margaret's eyes as she had fled from the kitchen stayed with him, and he wondered uneasily what she was doing now. He requested Amy to go in search of her and beg her to grant him an interview, and he dispatched Earl in quest of Elmer Hamlin. Until his friend arrived he paced the kitchen restlessly, and when at last Amy's gypsy face appeared in the doorway he turned eagerly to her despite the fact that Elmer was in the midst of a confidence regarding Portia.

"Margaret won't come," volunteered Amy. "She 's—a—she 's—" she hesitated, decided not to continue, and darted out of the room.

The doctor looked in vain for Margaret at the dinner-table and, although he conscientiously gave his professional attention to Portia, who sat opposite him, his thoughts wandered often to the dark-eyed girl; and when he partook of the delicious dessert he wondered if she had returned to the kitchen and finished making it.

It was decided that Portia should accom-

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pany the doctor to the village after dinner and induce Mrs. Ilverton to have her eyes examined. In her concern for her friend, Portia seemed to lose sight of her irritation toward Dr. Foster, and she ran upstairs in good spirits to prepare for her drive. While waiting for her to descend, the doctor paced restlessly about the porch. Must he depart without seeing the dark-eyed Margaret once again? Hamlin was talking anxiously at his elbow, but he gave him little heed. Suddenly he saw a little yellow head bobbing about the lawn, and, springing down the steps, he beckoned Earl to him.

"See here, little boy," he requested, "will you take a note to Miss Margaret for me?"

Earl assenting, the doctor hastily tore off a prescription blank and scribbled an apology and a request for a moment's interview upon it. Earl bore away the message, and returned in a few moments; but, although the doctor delayed his departure as long as possible, no dark-eyed girl descended the staircase, and at last he was obliged to climb into the buggy beside Portia and drive away. Turning, however, for one last look at the house, he observed in an upstairs window a slender, girlish figure. He lifted his hat with an eager gesture,

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and to his joy a white handkerchief fluttered for a moment in the breeze.

Portia was radiant when she returned home that afternoon Dr. Foster had held out decided hope to Mrs. Ilverton, and Agnes had consented to go to the city and see a specialist as soon as possible.

"I am going to draw out every cent I possess," Portia confided to Donald as she tripped happily by his side to the stable that night. "I whispered that fact to Agnes before I left, and, although she protested against it, I know she will consent to borrow it, because she will know she ought to. I am going to take Amy home to-morrow, and, of course, I shall spend all the time I can with Agnes from now on until she goes away, so I can help her get ready. I am going to take care of Amy for her all the time she is gone."

But while Donald and Portia were happy walking through the dewy pasture, Elmer Hamlin was in the depths of despondency. He had met Dr. Foster at the depot, whither Portia had driven him from Agnes's house, and, refusing Portia's invitation to ride home with her, had remained to see his friend off. As soon as Portia had driven away he turned eagerly to the doctor and exclaimed:

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"Well, tell me what you think."

The doctor hesitated a moment.

"Tell me," insisted Elmer, impatiently.

"How badly deranged is she? Is it a serious difficulty or only some slight trouble which will easily yield to treatment?"

The doctor averted his eyes from the anxious face a moment, then brought them back with grave sympathy in their depths.

"Elmer," he declared, regretfully, "Miss Overton, or Miss Dennison, whichever her real name is, is no more insane than I am."

"But, Foster," persisted Hamlin, growing white, "she must be. Otherwise—think of how she is acting!"

The doctor nodded silently. There was no comfort to offer. The whistle of the incoming train was heard.

"Doctor, are you certain Pearl Overton and Portia Dennison are one and the same? May I not be mistaken?"

The doctor lifted his valise and held out his hand.

"There is no mistake, Hamlin," he declared, positively; "the girl I saw to-day was Pearl Overton."

Hamlin walked away from the depot with misery in his heart. While he had believed

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the girl he loved to be insane, he could excuse anything in her conduct; but if what the doctor said were true—and he could not doubt it—what was he to think? He wandered down to the river bank, desiring to be alone with his sorrow, and it was dusk before he wearily climbed the hill to the farm again. The house, peaceful and homelike, showed cheery lights in its windows; Earl and Amy frolicked upon the lawn, and along the grassy lane leading to Donald's place came two figures. As he gazed for a second, a strong arm was placed around a girlish waist, a golden-brown head settled contentedly upon a broad shoulder, and with a groan Elmer hastened into the house.

Chapter XII

ADARK period ensued for Elmer Hamlin. For a week he was nearly distraught. Portia was absent from the farmhouse most of the time, engaged, so her family believed, in assisting Mrs. Ilverton make preparation for going to the city; but in Elmer's mind dark suspicions struggled. He determinedly kept himself at the farm, not even going to the city for the week-end, as was his custom. Since Portia was in full possession of her senses, her conduct was inexcusable, he told himself, and he grimly vowed that she should not make a fool of him. His demeanor toward her was frigid in the extreme, and although it apparently caused her a little surprise, it did not seem to weigh upon her spirits. During the time she was at home she appeared contented and happy. Donald had made her an easel, and all her spare moments were spent painting and sketching. Her ardor was a little dashed by the difficulties which beset her.

"The paint is so disappointing, Donald,"

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she complained to her sympathetic lover. "I can imagine beautiful pictures, and I am certain that my sketches are fairly good, too; but when I try to paint, my work nearly makes me cry."

"Oh, do n't get discouraged so soon, my darling," encouraged the patient Donald. "One does n't become a great artist all at once. You need practice and study."

"Yes," wistfully. "I wish I could take some lessons."

"Well, take some."

But she shook her head. "I 've planned out all my money," she objected.

"But I—"

"No," she interrupted, blushing rosily; "your money is not mine—yet. I 'll wait and work along by myself awhile longer. But I do wish I could see an artist work."

It was arranged that Donald and Portia should accompany Agnes to the city and see her settled in a quiet boarding-place. On the evening before their departure, as the family was gathering around the supper-table, little Earl entered from the porch with a folded paper in his hand.

"I found a letter under a stone," he announced.

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"Under a stone? How odd!" commented Portia. "Will you give it to me, dear?"

Earl looked around the circle importantly. "I do n't know," he deliberated; "I guess I 'll give it to—to Uncle Henry," he decided.

Mr. Dennison accepted the missive with a smile, and glanced at it.

"But it 's for Portia, after all," he said. "It is addressed to Miss Dennison."

Portia tore open the envelope with lively curiosity. "Where was the stone you found it under, Earl?" she asked.

"On the porch. Oh, Aunt Caroline, is it honey in that dish?"

As Portia's eyes traveled down the page her red lips fell apart in amazement and her hand went involuntarily to a gold chain which hung around her neck.

"Why, Uncle Henry, some one wants my chain!" she ejaculated.

Every one looked at her in surprise.

"Your chain, child? What do you mean?" inquired Mr. Dennison.

"Read it, Uncle Henry."

The letter was poorly written, in a straggling hand, upon a piece of plain note-paper, and read as follows:

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"Dear Miss I need your chane with the ring it will proove to your hapiness plesse let me take it by leving it under the stone at dark put a leter to tell how much I must pay to borow it and I will leeve the muny."

Uncle Henry read the letter and passed it, without comment, to his son. Donald laughed over it, and it was handed, in turn, to Aunt Caroline and Hamlin.

"What can it mean?" puzzled Portia.

"Some little girl has fallen in love with your necklace, Portia," responded Donald.

"Hardly a child's handwriting," commented Elmer, glancing penetratively at Portia. The young girl's eyes were troubled.

"My dear chain," she murmured, fingering it lovingly. "I could n't let any one take my chain."

The necklace under discussion was a curiously-wrought gold chain, and strung upon it was a tiny finger-ring. Hamlin had noticed it particularly, because Portia always wore it, no matter how she was dressed. He had admired alike the effect upon the plain, dark dresses she wore in the city library, the gingham dresses she worked about the house in at the

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farm, and the dainty afternoon and evening dresses she affected.

"The chain is a curious one," he remarked. "It has a foreign appearance. Did you buy it in America, Mr. Dennison?"

Uncle Henry hesitated a second and glanced at his wife before he answered:

"I did not purchase the chain myself at all, Mr. Hamlin. Portia wore it when she came to us."

"Pardon me. I had forgotten for a moment that Miss Portia is your niece, instead of your daughter."

"Indeed, Portia is our daughter," rejoined Mr. Dennison, quickly, and Aunt Caroline added:

"She is more our daughter than our niece. In fact, Mr. Hamlin, there is no tie of blood between us. Portia is our adopted daughter."

"Adopted!"

Hamlin struggled between amazement and a fierce tide of jealousy which surged up within him as he glanced from Portia to Donald. They were not, then, related! Aunt Caroline went on with her explanation:

"My sister, who is now dead, took Portia, when she was a baby, from an orphan asylum. We learned to love the child while my sister

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had her, and it was at that time she learned to call us uncle and aunt. Upon my sister's death we adopted her formally, and she continues to address us in the old way, although I am sure she looks upon us as her father and mother. Do n't you, darling?"

But Portia's loving answer was unheard by Elmer. He was in the grip of overwhelming jealousy. Portia was looking across the table into Donald's eyes, and he recalled the day, so short a time since, when, in the hospital, she had abandoned herself so willingly to his caresses, when she had declared her love for him and had promised to be his wife.

"My dear child," said Uncle Henry, "had you not better lay aside your chain for the present? I do not attach a great deal of importance to this letter; still I think it would be better for you not to wear the necklace for awhile now."

"Give it to me, Portia," said Donald, reaching out his hand as Portia unclasped the chain. "I will take care of it for you."

Elmer's eyes flashed fire. "Give it to *me*," he demanded, reaching out an imperative hand.

Portia laughed a trifle nervously. "I can keep it quite well myself," she protested. "I know more hiding-places than either of you do.

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I won't wear it again until you think it safe to do so, Uncle Henry."

Upon the following morning Donald and Portia took Agnes Ilverton to the city in the automobile. In the evening, when they returned, Hamlin's jealous eyes at once discovered a new ring sparkling upon Portia's finger.

One morning, a day or two later, Portia was in the kitchen making custard-pies. The eggs, beaten to a golden foaminess, were waiting in a snowy ocean of sugar for the milk which little Earl had been sent to Donald's place to fetch. Usually the little fellow was quite prompt in dispatching this errand, which had become one of his regular tasks; but this morning he lingered. Portia finally went out upon the porch and, shading her eyes with her hand, looked toward Donald's place. She was just in time to see a little figure emerge from behind a clump of hazel-bushes which grew beside the grassy path. Earl's face was flushed and his straw hat was pushed far back upon his curly, yellow head. One arm was stretched stiffly out from his staggering little body, and with the other he manfully strove to carry, without spilling, a six-quart pail of milk. Portia always provided him with a large utensil, in

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order that the one quart of milk, which was all she required in the morning, should not be spilled. She looked in wonder this morning upon the milk-bespattered little figure which tottered along with its slopping burden; then, dropping her hand from her eyes, she ran down the path to meet him. Seeing her coming, the child deposited the pail upon the grass and awaited her arrival. His small trousers were soaked with milk, his shoes were filled. Spatters of white shone upon his dark-blue blouse, and as he wiped a hand across his face he left a smear of milk upon cherry lips and crimson cheek.

"Why, Earl, dear, what is the matter?" cried Portia, reaching his side. "Did you fall down and spill the milk?"

"No-o. It spilled itself."

"But, darling, why did Mrs. Smith send so much?" queried Portia, glancing in surprise at the pail, which, despite the amount which had evidently been spilled, was still over half full.

Earl dug a toe into the grassy lane. "I get so tired of going every day," he confessed, "that I thought I'd bring enough this time to last a week."

Portia stared a minute; then, gathering the

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pathetic milky figure into her arms, she hid her laughing face in the yellow curls."

"Never mind, dear," she comforted, "you need n't go for milk any more unless you want to. Come, let Portia carry the pail now, and we will go home."

Rising to take up the pail, her eyes wandered toward Donald's place, and she paused in surprise.

"Whose auto is over there, Earl?" she inquired.

"Folks's." Earl was not interested. His feet felt sticky, and his arms ached.

"But what do they want? Probably they meant to come to our house," pursued Portia, with all the curiosity of a country girl regarding visitors. "Did you see them, Earl?"

"Uh-hu. A lady wants to board."

"To board! At *Donald's* place? Oh, she can't. Run on home, dear," she added, "and ask Margaret to come for this milk. Then find Aunt Caroline and get some dry clothes on. I am going to Donald's place."

Chapter XIII

A LARGE touring-car stood in the yard at Donald's place, and Portia cast an admiring glance at it as she ran up the front doorsteps. In the hall she found Mrs. Smith listening with a perturbed countenance to the persuasions of a pretty young lady in a gray motoring-costume. When Portia opened the door the stranger turned, and Portia found herself looking into one of the sweetest faces she had ever seen. Big brown eyes looked out from under wind-tossed brown curls, and a winsome mouth smiled with engaging friendliness. The young lady hesitated a moment, glancing at Mrs. Smith; but as that good woman maintained an embarrassed silence, the stranger introduced herself.

"My name is Mrs. Aldrich," she said to Portia. "Do you live here?"

"Not in this house," responded Portia, "but I am Portia Dennison, and this is the Dennison farm."

"Oh, then I hope you can help me. I am in something of a dilemma. My husband and

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I are taking an auto-trip through the country. It is a delightful experience, and I am enjoying it exceedingly; but—" She paused and glanced up into Portia's face merrily. "My husband is an artist," she finished, with an air of having explained a great deal.

"An artist!" Portia's face lighted up. "Where is he?" she queried, looking around eagerly.

Mrs. Aldrich laughed ruefully. "At the present moment he is out on your hill sketching so busily that he neither knows nor cares where he will eat to-day nor sleep to-night," she replied, "and that is just where my trouble comes in. I know by experience that he will not be easily drawn from this place until he has studied, under every possible light, some scene out there that has captured his fancy. And that," she added, "is the reason I am so anxious to secure a lodging-place at this house."

"Oh," cried Portia, eagerly, "do come and stay at our home. We should all be delighted to have you. The house is only a little distance from here."

"But why will not this place do?"

"This is only the house where we board our hired help."

"All the better," declared Mrs. Aldrich.

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"Not but what I am sure we should enjoy ourselves at your home," she hastened to add, "only Mr. Aldrich will be so absorbed that he will be dull company, and I think it would be better all around if we should stay here. We will make no trouble," she pleaded, looking into Mrs. Smith's face with the winning smile which no mortal had ever yet been able to resist. "Simply give us a room to sleep in and serve us with any kind of meals you find handy at any time that is convenient, and we shall be perfectly satisfied. We will eat out on the grass if you say so."

So finally Sylvia Aldrich gained her way, and Portia ran home with an excited face to finish her pies and tell her news.

But, although Portia haunted Donald's place with longing in her heart during the next few days, she caught only distant glimpses of Gordon Aldrich. The young wife never invited any one to accompany her to the side of the artist as he sat working with the impetuosity that only one keenly sensitive to the rapidly-changing face of Nature could understand. Portia longed to talk with this man. How much he could tell her! How she wanted to watch him work! When, at last, she received an introduction to him, she tried to put

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into words some of her hopes and ambitions; but the very strength of her desire caused her to be tongue-tied in his presence, and the interview passed without Mr. Aldrich having suspected that she had any inclination toward art. With Mrs. Aldrich, Portia felt acquainted almost at once, and both she and Margaret spent all the time they could with the charming young wife. Portia noticed that she usually carried her reading, writing, embroidery, or other work to some spot in sight of her husband.

"Gordon thinks he can work better when I am near," she confessed one day to Portia as they sat together under a tree. "I used to think that he only told me so to please me, but I have really noticed that when I go away he soon becomes restless and his work ceases to go smoothly, and that it is not long before he puts away his brush or pencil."

Looking into the beautiful face, Portia felt a sudden desire to confide her own ambitions to this sympathetic woman. She began: "I am going to be a great artist myself some day, Mrs. Aldrich."

A quick light flashed into Sylvia's face. "You are?" she exclaimed. "Oh, I do congratulate you! I am always envying artists.

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They seem to live in a different world from us ordinary people. Now, I love beautiful things myself, but as Gordon and I ride through the country I never see the beauties that he does until he points them out to me. He has the keenest eye for the sheen on a bird's wing, the flutter of a leaf, the bend of the grass and grain. He sees wonderful golden lights in every old heap of straw, and a common pasture of weeds is a rich blending of harmonious colors to him. From the first pale light that glows along the eastern hills at daybreak he notices the changing atmosphere until we see the sudden rush of light up the heavens that tells of the rising moon. You are indeed to be congratulated, Miss Dennison, if you possess an artist's heart and eyes."

Portia felt a little uneasiness stirring in her heart. Did she indeed possess these attributes?

"Training and study open one's artistic senses," she affirmed.

"Certainly," agreed Sylvia; "and yet, unless one possesses a sense for beauty in color and form, and a mind susceptible of receiving and revealing the most delicate and poetic impressions of that beauty, study would be of no avail. Every artist is more or less of a poet."

Again Portia felt the rise of certain un-

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welcome feelings, but she resolutely crowded them down.

"Oh, Mrs. Aldrich," she exclaimed, "you have no idea how I want to paint a wonderful picture! My uncle often talks about this world, likening it to an inn. If only, during my little day here, I might paint at least one picture, which would hang upon the walls after I am gone, inspiring others to higher living, how happy I should be!"

Sylvia's eyes looked sympathy and understanding, but she did not speak, and Portia ended her outburst with a sigh.

"But I need so much study," she said.

Sylvia smiled brightly. "Oh, well, there is plenty of time for that," she encouraged.

"Time enough," agreed Portia, "but no money." She laughed. Already she felt better. It was pleasant to confide in this sweet new friend, and she felt no backwardness in confessing her lack of money, since Sylvia had told several tales of her own poverty before her marriage. No doubt she was still in very modest circumstances, Portia reflected. Artists were nearly always poor.

"Oh, the money will surely come to you," prophesied Sylvia. "Where shall you go to study?"

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Portia named the nearby city, and Sylvia exclaimed, in delight:

"Why, my dearest friend lives there: Mrs. Ruth Huntington. We roomed together before we were married. You must surely go to see her. I will give you her address before we forget it."

And, taking a card from her work-basket, Sylvia wrote upon it.

A sudden whoop caused them to turn their heads, and they saw little Earl skipping toward them over the grass.

"Portia! Portia!" he cried. "There's a ice-cream social down-town. I want to go. I want to go."

"A social dear? How do you know?"

"There's a big note on a tree. I saw it. We went for the mail, and Donald said children go in the afternoon, and probably you'd take me."

The blue eyes looked up with such confidence that Sylvia murmured:

"Surely you can't disappoint him."

"No. Of course we will go, Earl; and won't you come too, Mrs. Aldrich? Do, please. I want you to see the village; and if Mr. Aldrich misses you, maybe he will come

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down and walk home with us. Let's get Margaret and Amy, and all go."

Allowing herself to be persuaded, Sylvia tripped across the yard to inform her husband of her intention, while Portia dispatched Earl in quest of Margaret and Amy.

"Please bring me a handkerchief when you come back, Earl," she called, as he started off. "You will find some in a box in the lower drawer of my dresser."

Shortly Earl appeared again, accompanied by Margaret and Amy. He bore in his hand a box.

"I had to bring 'em all, 'cause I didn't know which one you wanted," he explained; and Portia laughed as she took the box.

"Any one would have done, dear," she remarked. "Why, here is my chain. I forgot I had hidden it in this box."

She held the necklace in her hand a moment, considering. She disliked to go back home with it now, and yet she must not disregard Uncle Henry's request.

"Do hurry, Portia," urged Earl. "All the rest have gone ahead."

Portia laid the handkerchief-box under the tree and smiled down into the upraised eyes;

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then, obeying a sudden impulse, she dropped the chain over the child's golden head.

"Will you wear my chain for me, Earl?" she asked.

The little fellow shouted his delight as he danced along the path, and as Portia followed, she reflected:

"No one can possibly steal the chain in broad daylight, especially when so many of us are together. I will hide it again when I get home."

Chapter XIV

THE “big note” of Earl’s description proved to be a large cloth sign fastened between two trees, and our little party was readily guided by it to the scene of the social. Portia found many girl friends on the lawn, and it was a delight to her to introduce Mrs. Aldrich and Margaret to them.

The afternoon shadows lengthened as they lingered in congenial company under the shady trees. At length Portia, turning from a group of girls to look for the children, stopped suddenly with a delighted exclamation. Across the grass was approaching Gordon Aldrich. He carried his hat in his hand, and an expression of appreciation was upon his face as he glanced about the green lawn with its decoration of white-covered tables. His eyes immediately sought out his wife; but since she was occupied in a manner peculiarly her own, he forbore to disturb her, but came instead to the little table beside which Portia had dropped into a chair,

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and he seated himself contentedly opposite her. The girl's heart pounded excitedly. Here, at last, was the opportunity she had been craving. If only the artist would converse about the things she wished him to talk about! She looked up at him with timidly imploring look as he seated himself, and he smiled back at her with an artist's delight in her beauty. He noted the golden sheen on the brown hair, and the high lights in her eyes. His gaze lingered over the flesh-tints that deepened so softly into pink on the dimpled cheeks, and then his eyes wandered with satisfaction to the deep-green foliage which constituted her background.

"I am so glad you came, Mr. Aldrich," began Portia, timidly. "I—I have been wanting to talk to you."

She was determined to be bold, yet, nevertheless, her eyes fluttered to the ground and the pink of her cheeks deepened.

"Talk to me?" smiled Aldrich. "Please do. It would delight me."

"About—about art," plunged Portia, and the artist stiffened a little, his smile fading.

Gordon Aldrich disliked discussing his work. He was almost abnormally sensitive, and to talk about one of his pictures while it was in process of creation would be to kill it, he

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felt. He recalled a couple of unhappy occasions in which he had allowed interested friends to view an unfinished canvas, and a grim smile crossed his face as he remembered that after their comments he had never been able to touch brush to those canvases again. But his smile changed to kindness as he looked down into Portia's eager eyes. Her personality was delightsome and her timid smile irresistible.

"Are you interested in art, Miss Dennison?" he asked, encouragingly.

"Oh, yes," Portia confided. "I am longing to be an artist myself."

Mr. Aldrich looked at her again, searchingly instead of dreamily this time.

"And why do you desire to be an artist?" he inquired.

Portia hesitated a moment, wondering how to put her thoughts into words, and Aldrich went on:

"Do you think art will pay? Or do you want to amuse yourself? Or—" He began to smile at Portia's shocked expression, and paused.

"Oh, go on," she breathed, "only use different words from those—very, very different."

"Perhaps," he hazarded, "you wish to be-

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come an artist in order that by your work you may inspire, elevate, and help mankind?"

Portia's eyes lighted up, and involuntarily she leaned toward him across the table.

"That is exactly my motive," she declared. "I can't be content, Mr. Aldrich, to live a humdrum, commonplace life day after day, thinking little thoughts, making little plans, and doing little things."

"A commonplace life we say and we sigh,
But why should we sigh as we say:
The commonplace sun in the commonplace sky
Makes up the commonplace day.
The moon and the stars are commonplace things,
And the flower that blooms and the bird that sings.
But dark were the world and sad our lot
If the flowers failed and the sun shone not.
And God who studies each separate soul
Out of commonplace life, makes His beautiful whole,"

quoted Aldrich, smiling.

Portia was silent, but she glanced at him rather reproachfully; and after a moment he said, gravely:

"Do not think me unsympathetic, Miss Dennison. I believe that your motives are of the highest; but the life of an artist is one of constant self-sacrifice and hard work. He must

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live entirely for the ideal, and must be satisfied to receive for his reward only that soul-stimulation that comes from the pursuit of the beautiful. The moment art is regarded as merely a plaything, or the moment the thought of money-making is connected with it, it is profaned. But if you feel a clear call, Miss Dennison, and if you are willing to make a sacrifice of yourself upon Art's altar, she will no doubt give you wondrous things, which you, in turn, can give to the world."

Gordon Aldrich's eyes were growing absent as he talked. He was losing sight of the girl before him as before his mental eyes radiant visions of what he himself hoped to give to the world by his brush appeared. He was rapidly sinking into a golden reverie when Portia's voice recalled him.

"Mr. Aldrich," she ventured, "*what* should you advise me to paint?"

Aldrich came to himself with a start. He glanced at Portia, and then around the lawn. His wife was sitting at a table not far distant, surrounded by a dozen children whom she had discovered hovering upon the edge of the lawn, eying the tables with the longing which only a child whose pockets are empty can feel. The wistfulness had been chased from the childish

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faces by Sylvia's invitation to partake of refreshments with her, and now beaming smiles were irradiating each face.

"Paint?" mused Gordon Aldrich. "Paint a smile upon the face of a child, Miss Dennison."

Portia's face fell, but the artist continued, smilingly:

"Look at my wife. She does n't pretend to be an artist, and yet I realize that she paints more beauty into the world every day by her sweet living than I do by my brush. Paint smiles on human faces if you never paint anything else, Miss Dennison. As for the other kind of painting, I can not advise you. To each artist comes his own inspiration. If you are called, it will come to you. And now I must disturb Sylvia, because I want to tell her that we move on to-morrow."

Mr. Aldrich arose, and Portia looked after him with disappointment as he moved away. What had she gained from the interview? Rising with a sigh, she went over to a group of girls and inquired of Margaret as to the whereabouts of the children.

"I do n't know where they are," said Margaret, turning a surprised face. "I supposed they were with you."

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A touch of uneasiness came to Portia. She remembered the chain she had placed around Earl's neck. She swept the lawn with her eyes, but no golden head nor gypsy-like face greeted her sight. Her fears mounted rapidly, and, pressing the group of girls into her service, she instituted a search. The house, the grounds, the entire vicinity was hunted over, but the children were not to be found. Mr. Aldrich's face looked grave when Portia, in an agony of fear and self-reproach, confided to him the story of the necklace; but he essayed to comfort her.

"It would be no great task to hunt the entire village over," he told her, cheerfully. "Oakdale is too small a town for children to get lost in. I will drive back to the farm at once. The children may have gone home. If I do not find them there, nor upon the road, I will return and we will search the town."

But the children were not at the farm. Donald and Hamlin both returned with Mr. Aldrich in the automobile, and a serious search of the town began. At the postoffice the anxious party received the first clue.

"Yes," responded the postmaster, "Amy Ilverton was in here awhile ago, asking for a

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letter from her mother. A pretty little boy was with her."

At a nearby store more information was gained. A delighted grin overspread the store-keeper's face at the mention of the small runaways.

"Yes, I saw them," he chuckled. "They came in here and looked through the showcase at the candy. I asked them if they wanted some, and they assured me that they did. So I turned to get a bag; but when I reached into the case for the candy, the little boy remarked, bashfully, 'You 'd better not give us very much, though, 'cause we have n't got any money.' "

The man chuckled again, and even the worried listeners smiled a little, so like Earl was the artless observation.

But after leaving this store they searched in vain for an hour. All trace of the children seemed lost. They had entered no other stores nor houses. Finally, when the hopes of the party seemed dying, like the day which was turning to the dusk of night about them, they happened upon a tow-haired boy who was lounging along a side street, followed by a yellow dog. Aldrich stopped the car to allow Donald to make the inquiries which he had now

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uttered so often, and, to the joy of all, this lad did not shake his head. Ole Peterson—for it was no other than the boy who had so shamelessly whistled away the dog which the children had “buyed” of him—admitted by a nod that he knew something about the lost ones.

“You have seen them? Oh, where, where are they?” cried Portia, too overjoyed to wait for Donald to continue his inquiries. Her heart fluttered like a bird as the weight upon it began to lift. “Tell us—tell us quickly,” she besought him.

“Jest the gall,” corrected the boy, indifferently, his pale eyes roving with interest over the big automobile.

“Only Amy!” despaired Portia, her soul sinking again. “Oh, Donald, what does it mean? Where can little Earl be?”

“Probably Amy can tell us,” cheered Donald. “We are lucky to have found her. Where is she, boy?”

“Back a piece.” Ole jerked a vague thumb over his shoulder, continuing his examination of the auto, and Mr. Aldrich reached down and touched his shoulder.

“Want a ride?” he inquired, kindly.

“You bet!”

“Jump in, then, and show us the way to Amy.”

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The boy lost no time in obeying, and before many more moments had passed, the occupants of the car discovered a little white heap by the roadside. Trembling with fears, Portia scarcely waited for the motor to stop before springing out and dropping down beside the little girl. It was a heartbroken Amy whom she gathered into her arms. Sobs shook the childish form, and tears bedewed Portia plentifully as she tried to comfort and soothe.

"He 's lost; he 's lost!" wailed Amy, in bitterest grief. "Earl's lost, and it is all my fault."

"But, Amy, where did he go? Why do you say he is lost? Do tell us all about it, dear?" pleaded Portia; but the child answered only with sobs.

"There, there, darling; do n't cry so. We shall find Earl very soon. Only tell us where you saw him last."

But Amy found it difficult to be coherent.

"I do n't know," and "It 's all my fault," were the only words Portia succeeded in drawing from her.

Finally Donald descended from the car, and taking the child from Portia's arms, he stood her gently on the ground and knelt before her.

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"Now, Amy," he ordered, firmly, "stop crying at once."

A fresh burst of tears was his answer; but, steadying the little figure which threatened to topple over upon him, he repeated:

"Stop crying, Amy. You must tell us immediately where Earl is."

"I do n't know."

"When did you see him last?"

No answer save sobs.

"Where were you last together?" asked Donald, changing his question a little.

"Down on the—the corner."

"What corner?"

"By the s-store."

"What store?"

Sobs.

"What store, Amy? Do you mean Brown's, where you got the candy?"

"Yes. He—he—I—we wanted some string for our bows 'n arrows," sobbed Amy, plunging suddenly into her story. "We're—we're learning to be hunters an—and we practice on your ducks and—and the one who missed most times had to get new string, an—and he did n't like to ask, but I made him go back and—and *I wish I had n't.*"

Amy's speech ended in a burst of tears that

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sent her plunging upon Donald's shoulder; but, ignoring alike her grief and her confession regarding his ducks, the young man straightened her up again and continued the interlocution:

"Do you mean that Earl went back to Brown's store while you stayed around the corner, Amy?"

"Y-yes."

"Then what happened?"

"He did n't come back any more." Sobs.

"Have n't you seen him since?"

"N-no." More sobs.

"Did you look for him and call his name?"

"Yes. He's lost, or stoled, or the fairies took him, or the angels, or—or—"

"Amy, is this absolutely all you can tell us about Earl?"

Receiving a sobbing assurance in the affirmative, Donald arose and placed both Amy and Portia in the automobile again, and Aldrich drove back to Brown's. But it was positively declared by the storekeeper and his clerk that the little boy had not re-entered the store, and the minutest search failed to reveal him anywhere about the place. The news of his disappearance spread rapidly through the town, and the kind-hearted people of the place joined in the search with diligence, but all to no avail.

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Street after street was searched, house after house entered, but no little boy was found.

The hours passed; dusk was succeeded by the translucent darkness of a perfect summer night, and still the automobile scoured the town. Portia, nearly frantic with anxiety, appealed constantly to Donald, as though he certainly must be able to help her. Margaret grew moment by moment more quiet. Amy finally sobbed herself to sleep, with her head in sympathetic Mrs. Aldrich's lap. It was midnight when at last the automobile ascended the hill with its weary, depressed young load. Portia looked with dry, burning eyes up at the white farmhouse as it stood outlined against the purple sky. The elms were silent, every leaf asleep, and above their tips great stars gleamed like topazes.

It was a calm and peaceful night; yet, how could she rest under shelter of a roof while Earl—tender, loving little Earl—was somewhere out in the darkness? Mr. and Mrs. Dennison were anxiously waiting upon the porch, and after a little conversation all went into the house. But Amy was the only one who was able to sleep that night. Donald and Elmer again descended the hill and wandered restlessly about the night-enfolded village,

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straining their eyes vainly to catch a gleam of golden hair, and stopping often to harken for a cry from a childish voice. When morning dawned they climbed the hill again, gray with fatigue, and shook sorrowful heads when eager eyes looked to them for hope.

Chapter XV

WHEN Amy awoke, in the morning, her distress was pitiable. Salt-tears fell into her glass of milk, and she pushed away her breakfast untasted.

"I want Earl," she sobbingly reiterated. "I do n't want him to be lost." And Portia was forced to arouse herself from her own grief to comfort the child.

"I never was very good to Earl," lamented Amy. "I would n't go with him for the milk, and when we divided the dog I made him take the back half. 'T was his money that buyed it, too," and Amy's tears fell faster.

"Never mind those things now, dear; Earl would n't care about them. Try to eat a little breakfast," coaxed Portia.

"But when we flied a kite, and it came down on a horse's head, I ran away and let the man blame Earl, and—and—when—"

But Portia stopped the little mouth with kisses and, putting forth her utmost endeavors, she finally succeeded in raising poor Amy's

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spirits to a considerable degree. In the meantime Donald telephoned the sad news to Mrs. Emmett and also to Earl's father.

Finally, toward noon, when Portia had established Amy in the garden among the roses, she left her for awhile, surrounded by her dolls, while she went over to Donald's place to bid good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Aldrich. After the farewells were said and the smoothly-running touring-car had disappeared from sight, Portia turned sadly in the direction of home again, but Mrs. Smith called her back.

"Mrs. Aldrich left this letter for you," said the woman, holding out a missive. "She told me to wait until your worry about little Earl was over, but I don't see no use in waitin'; so I wish you'd take it now and let me get shut of it."

Portia took the letter, although with little curiosity. She was weary from her sleepless night, and anxiety about the lost child lay like lead upon her heart.

"When the worry about little Earl is over," she reflected, sadly; "that will only be when he is found."

She seated herself upon the grass and indifferently tore open the envelope. "I may as well read it now," she murmured. A folded

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paper fluttered out, and she laid it to one side as she opened the letter. It read as follows:

"**M**Y DEAR MISS PORTIA: I am very much interested in what you told me about your artistic ambitions, and I want to beg the privilege of having a little part in their fulfillment. Let me tell you a secret. Mr. Aldrich and I have a great deal more money than you suspect. We have altogether too much; in fact, more than we want or need. So I want you, my dear new friend, to relieve us of a little of it. Since just at this time five hundred dollars will do you a great deal of good, and since we will not miss that amount at all, surely the sensible way is for us to give it to you, is it not? I hope you will look at it as we do. We give it to you just as we would give it to a sister of ours if we had one. You need not feel under the slightest obligation to us. I wanted to give it to you anonymously, but Gordon thinks you would, in that case, always be wondering about the donor; so we leave it in this letter, begging you to accept it with my love. Gordon says to tell you to feel free to spend it in some other way if you decide not to study art.

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I do n't know what he means, but I add his
message any way, like a dutiful wife. With
love and best wishes,

"Your sincere friend,

"SYLVIA ALDRICH."

With wondering eyes Portia unfolded the crisp check and looked at it. What kindness, what sweetness, what understanding it represented! With a sudden rush of feeling she pressed its signature to her lips, and then sprang to her feet, eager to find Donald and communicate this marvelous thing to him at once. As she ran along the path her spirits continued to rise. In the driveway ahead of her she discerned a vehicle and two men sitting inside of it. Recalling Donald's telephone conversation with Mr. Emmett, she knew that Earl's father had arrived, accompanied by a detective. Now everything would be made right speedily, she told herself. Before she gained the house her imagination had pictured little Earl as found, her necklace recovered, its mysterious purloiner unearthed, and she herself traveling cityward, her art studies about to commence. But when she entered the house she was met with news that shattered her hopes and turned her skies to blackness. Amy Ilver-

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ton was lost! In the garden a deserted row of dolls lay upon the ground, and a few pink rose-petals were scattered about; but nowhere was the little girl to be found. Margaret had gone out, half an hour after Portia's departure, to see how Amy was faring, and had found her gone. She had made diligent search of the garden, and then, becoming alarmed, had summoned the rest of the household to her assistance; but all to no avail. Amy had disappeared as completely as little Earl.

Despair gripped Portia. She had felt the loss of Earl to be almost unendurable, especially since her conscience unceasingly upbraided her for her folly in adorning him with her necklace; but now, if she must tell poor Agnes Ilverton that Amy was lost, her cup of sorrow was indeed full to overflowing. A couple of miserable days ensued. Aunt Anna-belle arrived at last. Mrs. Dennison and the two girls watched with quaking hearts as the carriage bringing her from the depot climbed the hill. They had carefully removed all traces of little Earl from the house, so that the shock of seeing them might not prostrate the afflicted mother when she entered the rooms. The blue-ribboned sailor-hat was taken from the hall-rack by Portia, who watered it with bitter tears

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as she hung it out of sight. Several tin soldiers and a toy sword, which decorated the library-table, and which no one had had the heart to remove before, were tenderly laid away by Margaret, and Aunt Caroline herself, with dim eyes, had cleaned certain muddy little boots and trousers and laid them away in a closet. The carriage drew up at the door, and Donald assisted Aunt Annabelle to alight. Evelyn followed, and the party upon the porch hastened down the steps to greet them. Margaret, moved by swelling sympathy, impulsively threw her arms around her aunt's neck and kissed her, while tears fell from her eyes. But Aunt Annabelle pushed her impatiently away.

"Do n't drop your tears all over me, Margaret," she said, crossly. "Dear me, Caroline, what intolerably dusty roads you have here! How do you ever endure them?"

Aunt Caroline, whose impulse also had been to embrace Mrs. Emmett, drew back and offered her hand instead.

"Come in, Annabelle," she said, "I am grieved that you had to be recalled by so sad an occurrence."

"Yes; most annoying." Mrs. Emmett swept up the steps. "It is intensely disagreeable to travel now that the weather has grown

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so warm. Well," removing her hatpins in the dining-room and casting a look over the table, which was set for the noon meal, "what news of the child?"

"I am afraid we have no definite hope to give you, Annabelle," sorrowfully replied Mrs. Dennison.

Mrs. Emmett dropped into a chair with a self-commiserating sigh. "Of course, Earl must be found at once," she remarked, looking around for a fan. "How warm it is to-day! The boy shall be severely punished for running away and putting me to so much trouble."

"But, Annabelle, we fear he was kidnaped."

"No doubt. No doubt. It serves me right for trusting my child to others."

Aunt Caroline reddened painfully, and such an anger surged in Portia that she turned hastily to leave the room. But at that moment the doorway was blocked by the incoming form of Mr. Emmett, and Portia stepped back again. Mrs. Emmett stared at her husband in surprise.

"You!" she ejaculated.

Mr. Emmett came forward and took his wife's hand; but it was limp and unresponsive in his, and he released it with a sigh.

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"I did n't know wild horses would drag you away from your business," she observed.

"The loss of my little son sufficed," rejoined her husband, sadly. "I shall return to the city this afternoon, however," he added.

"And who, pray, is to find the child?"

"I have employed an excellent detective and have offered a reward. I can do no good by remaining here."

The father's voice was a trifle husky as he finished, and as he turned to the window hastily, the sympathetic eyes in the room caught a glimpse of the pain he endeavored to conceal. Aunt Caroline made a movement toward him, but Evelyn was before him.

"Papa," she asked, a tenderer look in her face than he had ever yet seen there; "papa, should you like to have me go with you?"

"Go with him?" broke in her mother. "Go back to the hot city at this time of the year? Nonsense! Do n't be absurd, Evelyn. Earl will be found in a day or two, and we will go immediately to the seashore again."

But Evelyn heeded not the interruption. "Would you like to have me go with you, papa?" she repeated, a wistful note creeping into her voice.

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For answer her father took her two hands and drew her closely to him.

"Like it, my daughter," he responded, in a low, moved voice; "you would be the greatest possible comfort to me."

Despite her mother's scornful comments, Evelyn accompanied her father when he took his departure, and Aunt Caroline felt the nearest approach to a happy feeling she had experienced since the loss of Earl as she watched the father and daughter going away together, with the tie between them intensified.

Chapter XVI

ELMER HAMLIN was restless and miserable. The loss of the children was a sorrow to him as well as to their nearer friends, and in addition to this, his trouble and perplexity regarding Portia grew hourly more difficult to bear. It was maddening to him to see her turn so trustingly to Donald for comfort and advice. It tortured him to watch the new ring sparkling on her finger. A dozen times a day he told himself that he would leave the farm, never more to return; but as often the memory of the day when he had held the beautiful girl in his arms, and she had confessed her love for him, recurred and held him where he was. He could not quit the field, leaving Donald in possession, he told himself, without having first a clear explanation from Portia; but now, when she was in the grip of anxiety, he could not trouble her. So day after day he lingered on until finally an event occurred which sent him as well as Portia to the city.

One morning Portia was ironing in the

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kitchen. Salt-drops fell often upon the linen over which the hot iron was passing. Portia missed the children. The saucy wren chattered unheeded in his vine-wreathed home, the scent of the roses floated unnoticed through the windows. For the thousandth time Portia was asking herself how she could ever tell Agnes Ilverton that her daughter was lost. A boy appeared upon the porch, and, opening the screen-door, Portia received a telegram from him. With trembling fingers she opened it, and at a glance her eyes devoured the words. A second later she had dropped the paper and was running into the hall, calling to every one in the house. Aunt Caroline hurried from Uncle Henry's room, Margaret and Hamlin ran downstairs, and Aunt Annabelle came in from the porch. The telegram read as follows:

“The children want you. Come, if possible.
DR. FOSTER.”

The message was read and reread by the overjoyed but wondering group.

“How strange, that Dr. Foster should have found the children!” marveled Aunt Caroline.

“And who,” queried Aunt Annabelle, “is this Dr. Foster?”

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A lovely pink suffused Margaret's cheeks, but no one noticed it, and no one answered Aunt Annabelle, so full was each with wonderings.

"Why did the doctor wire for Portia instead of Donald?" propounded Hamlin; and "Are the children ill?" wondered Margaret. Portia felt almost intoxicated with joy as she began to realize the news. She embraced Aunt Caroline and Margaret. She danced around the hall till her cheeks were crimson. She laughed and sang and clapped her hands, and it was only when Aunt Caroline began to speak of the trip that she sobered.

"Possibly you will have to remain over night, darling," observed her aunt, thoughtfully. "I wonder where you had better stay?"

"At our house, of course," said Aunt Annabelle, promptly, and Aunt Caroline nodded approval, although her brow was knit and she wore an anxious expression.

"It worries me to have you go alone, dear," she hesitated.

"Oh, it need n't, Aunt Caroline. I know my way around the city quite well."

"Yes, Portia; but so much has happened to us lately that I am afraid. Donald must go with you."

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"But Donald is so busy now."

"I will accompany you," offered Hamlin, eagerly; but Portia ignored his words. Turning quickly to Margaret, she exclaimed:

"You can go with me, Margaret. Yes, indeed; now, you must. So it is all settled, Aunt Caroline, and you won't have to worry about us at all."

Margaret, divided between a shame-faced dread of meeting the "handsome" young doctor again and a decided desire to do so, blushed in a way unaccountable to Portia, and meekly acquiesced; and so it was arranged. Hamlin, hurt and indignant, resolved to take the train on the other side of the river and to keep a watchful eye upon Portia while she was in the city.

It was still early in the day when the girls arrived at their destination, and they were met by Dr. Foster. Portia greeted him with eager questions about the children, but his answers were unsatisfactory. So overwhelmed with delighted surprise was the young doctor at the sight of Portia's companion that it is no wonder he answered at random and that Portia's most important queries fell upon his ears unheeded. His attention was absorbed by the blushing girl, whose velvety dark eyes hid them-

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selves so shyly behind their drooping lids. When they were seated in the doctor's run-about, and he was threading his way through the busy streets, Portia tried questioning him again, but his machine required almost all his attention. Her query as to where the children were brought a blank stare from him, and in reply to her earnest entreaty to be taken to them at once, he said that he would call for her at three o'clock that afternoon. Before Portia could voice her impatience at this extraordinary delay, they had reached Mr. Emmett's house, and a moment or two later the doctor was gone.

Portia followed Margaret into the house with a dissatisfied feeling. To add to her impatience, they found Evelyn out, and only a stupid maid-servant in the house. Margaret was cheerful. She tried, though vainly, to cheer Portia.

"Have patience," she counseled. "It will be only a short time before you see the children. Let us be thankful they are found. I am at home in this house, you know, and I will set to work at once to get you a good luncheon."

But Portia was restless. She could interest herself in nothing, and wandered about nervously until struck by a happy thought.

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"Margaret," she said, "why could I not use this time to call on Mrs. Huntington?"

Margaret, who had been told of Mrs. Aldrich's friend, encouraged the idea, and without loss of time Portia set forth. As she traversed the streets her spirits arose. Now that the children were to be recovered, there was nothing standing in the way of her ambitions. She might come to the city as soon as she wished and commence her art studies. As she entered the grounds of Ruth Huntington's home she looked about her with admiration, and as she mounted the steps she reflected that if Mrs. Huntington should prove to be one-half as delightful an acquaintance as Sylvia Aldrich, she would be indeed a charming woman. Her heart beat a trifle nervously as she waited in a room which awed her with its magnificence; but at the first sight of Ruth Huntington all feelings save those of the pleasantest fled. Portia almost caught her breath at the first sight of the rippling golden hair, the lustrous blue eyes, and the exquisite contour of the beautiful face; but when two cordial hands were outstretched and a sincere voice bade her welcome, she lost sight of Ruth's beauty in thinking of her sweetness. Ruth made Portia remove her hat, and the two were soon con-

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versing interestedly about Sylvia Aldrich, and before long Ruth was drawing from her caller the story of the lost children. Ruth's interest was so sympathetic and unfeigned that Portia was moved also to tell her about Agnes Ilverton and the ordeal she was preparing to undergo. Time passed rapidly, and before Portia realized that it could be noon, the luncheon-hour arrived, and Ruth's husband with it. Portia was not allowed to depart then.

"You must stay longer with me," pressed Ruth. "I will send word to your friends to call here when it is time to go to the children. I want to have a longer talk with you."

Maurice Huntington added his persuasions to his wife's; so a telephone message was sent to Margaret, and Portia remained. After lunch Ruth showed Portia over her house. She appeared pleased at Portia's appreciation of it.

"I love my home," she acknowledged. "It is all and more than all I used to dream of in my old homeless days. And I have dedicated it to the Giver, just as I used to fancy I should do if I possessed such a treasure."

"Dedicated it?" puzzled Ruth.

"Yes; I consider that my home belongs more to the Lord than to my husband and me, and I delight in using it in His service. This

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room in particular I always try to have in use by some of His children."

She threw open the door of a room on the second floor as she spoke, and they entered a charming, sunny apartment.

"The furniture requires changing in accordance to the needs of its occupant," amplified Ruth, gazing around. "Last month I had a mother with a sick baby here, which explains the crib and all the toys. They have now gone to the country for the rest of the summer, thanks to my dear Sylvia and her money. For awhile before that an old gentleman occupied the room. He had fallen ill in the street, and temporarily his memory left him. I am thankful to say that here in this quiet place he gradually came to himself again, and now is safe among his children. I wonder," she went on musingly, "how Mrs. Ilverton would like the room arranged?"

"Agnes!"

"Yes. We must hang heavy curtains over the windows, and place the furniture against the walls, so that she won't stumble over anything when she moves about, must n't we?"

"Mrs. Huntington! What can you mean?"

Ruth laughed and slipped an arm around Portia's waist.

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"You do n't suppose I am going to let that dear little woman you told me about stay in a dreary boarding-house, alone, while I have a beautiful home, do you?" she reproached. "How can you have such a bad opinion of me? Of course, she must come here as soon as possible, and stay until it is time for her to go home."

Portia stood speechless, gazing into the beautiful face, and Ruth laughed again as she drew her out of the room.

"I am going to leave you alone for a few minutes now," she said, as they went along the hall. "There is something I must attend to; but you won't be lonely if I leave you in this room, because there are some beautiful pictures here." She opened a door for Portia to enter, and added, as she turned away: "The first one you come to is by Gordon Aldrich. You will be specially interested in that, since you know the artist."

Chapter XVII

THE room which Portia entered was long and narrow, and the first half of it seemed almost dark in comparison with the sunny corridor she had just quitted. Easy-chairs were scattered invitingly about, and, feeling weary with the events of the day, which had crowded so rapidly upon her, she sank into one of them for a few moments' rest. A peaceful silence reigned in the room. Around her, gleaming ivory-clear in the dim light, stood marble statues and busts upon pedestals. For awhile she allowed her mind to dwell happily upon the thought of Mrs. Huntington's intention toward Agnes Ilverton. The thought of Gordon Aldrich's picture, which she was to see, followed soon, and rising, she moved down the room, glancing each way in search of it. The apartment grew lighter as she advanced, until suddenly she halted abruptly before a picture which she knew at once to be the one she sought. For a moment she gazed, with parted lips; then, sinking into a seat before it, she gave

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herself up to a rapt examination of the canvas. The picture was parabolical—had she but known it—and had been suggested by Mrs. Aldrich, and painted by her husband as a belated wedding-gift to Ruth Huntington. But all Portia had eyes for was the exquisite coloring and the masterly execution of the painting. It depicted a stony roadway, the dull coloring of which furnished just the setting necessary to soften the radiant beauty of a woman's figure which appeared upon the road. That the lovely face of this figure was a portrait of Ruth Huntington, Portia noted at a glance. Indeed, so strongly was the personality presented that one actually seemed to hear words issuing from the slightly-parted lips, and to see a smile gradually dawn in the azure eyes. A burdened and weary traveler was toiling along this dreary road, and the woman was extending to him a helping hand. Her trusting glance was turned upward to where, among the misty gray rainclouds that trooped across the sky, shone a luminous light compact of angel-faces, and where, but faintly discerned, appeared one Face, superhumanly beautiful. Absorbedly and long Portia gazed, and at length tears began to steal from her eyes. Gordon Aldrich was gifted with a rare delicate

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sense in the placing of tones. Color and form were his birthright. This painting was softened and yet vivified by an indescribable atmosphere that Portia both saw with her eyes and felt with her sensitive spirit. And as she looked upon this work of genius a consciousness, definite, clear, but painfully unwelcome, began to dawn in her heart, and it grew until it filled her soul. The human consciousness passes understanding. Sometimes, against the face of all reason, from under the pressure of ignorance, inexperience and lack of opportunity, its voice comes to some one and proclaims, "Thou canst do this thing." Again, when all conditions favor success, when doors fly open and encouragements abound, the same voice inexorably states, "This thing thou canst not do." He who will heed his inmost consciousness may know definitely what he is capable of accomplishing and what he would better let alone. To poor Portia, sitting before Gordon Aldrich's painting, came the decisive voice which told her it was not given to her to help mankind by the use of brush and paint. Study and practice would be of no avail. The spark of genius was wanting.

"I might paint pictures that were as good as the ordinary," she mourned to herself; "I

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might even make money by my work; but that is not what I want to do. Oh, no; it is far, far from what I want!"

A bitter burst of weeping came with this admission, and Portia bowed her head in grief. Before her tears were conquered Mrs. Huntington returned, and she paused before her guest in consternation. In a moment more her kind arms were around Portia, and she was wooing the cause of her grief from her. Very tender and sympathetic she was when she heard the story; but to all of her encouragements Portia only shook a sad head. The edict that had come to her was too plain to be gainsaid.

"If it were only singing that you aspired to, I might be able to help you," sighed Ruth, at last. "Gordon Aldrich is the only artist I know, and he doesn't teach his art to others; but in the realm of music I know a man who can perfect a human voice and make of it what no other person can."

Portia raised a wet face and began to dry her tears, while a faint new hope stirred in her longing heart; but before she could speak, Dr. Foster was announced.

When Portia descended to the parlor she was surprised to find the doctor alone.

"Where is Margaret?" she inquired.

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"Miss Adams decided to remain at home," replied the doctor; and Portia wondered a little at the curious glance he gave her as they left the house. The doctor seemed to be in haste, and vouchsafed her no information until they were in the auto, traveling swiftly through the streets; then he turned to her.

"Miss Adams seems to think you are expecting me to take you to the children who were lost from your home," he remarked, interrogatively.

"Certainly I am," she replied, surprised. "To whom else?"

No reply. The doctor's attention was again upon his machine as he turned a corner.

"What do you mean, Dr. Foster?" demanded Portia, fearfully. She grasped his arm, in her impatience, and he looked at her oddly again. "Are you not taking me to Amy and Earl?" she trembled.

"I know nothing about Amy and Earl," he replied, slowly, and in consternation Portia fell back.

The automobile drew up before a large brick building, and the doctor sprang out.

"I have brought you to the hospital," he said, as he assisted Portia to alight. "Little Vena wants you."

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Dismay had stricken Portia temporarily speechless; but as they walked toward the door, words came flooding back to her, and she heaped mingled inquiries and reproaches upon the doctor. He answered nothing until they stood waiting for the door to open; then he said:

"I was not aware that the children from your place were lost. I only knew that little Vena was failing rapidly, and that with all her little heart she yearned for you. I was afraid it might be several days before you would visit her unless you were sent for; therefore I took the liberty of telegraphing. I might have sent word to your city address, but I knew I should be more likely to find you at the farm."

The opening of the door interrupted him at this juncture, and, taking Portia by the arm, he hurried her into the building and directly up the stairs. So much of her breath was required in making the ascent that she was unable to talk, and no words were exchanged until the doctor released her arm at the door of the children's ward.

"I will leave you now," he said, "and go back to my office. Shall I return for you, or will you walk home?"

"Oh, do n't leave me here," Portia gasped.

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"I don't know where I am. You'll have to take me back to Margaret."

The doctor's face expressed mingled impatience and perplexity. He looked at Portia with wondering eyes, but any excuse for seeing Margaret again was too precious to be disregarded.

"I will take you back to—to Margaret if you wish," he promised. "I will return for you after awhile. You had better go in at once now."

Before Portia could speak further, he pushed open the door of the children's ward, turned, and strode toward the stairs. Portia took one quick step after him, and then paused. Her eyes had fallen upon the occupants of the little white beds in the sunny room. A hush fell upon her spirit, and with suspended breath she bent toward the children. They lay in various attitudes, and the ward was pathetically quiet. Little white faces rested wearily upon pillows scarcely more white. Sober eyes stared up at the ceiling or gazed longingly out of the windows at the sky. Little hands reposed listlessly upon coverlets, and in the lines and curves of each fragile body was expressed a patience and resignation that went straight to the core of Portia's heart. Something between a sigh

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and a sob escaped her, and at the slight sound the children's faces turned simultaneously toward her. Instantly a transformation swept over the room, and as Portia witnessed it a sudden recollection of Gordon Aldrich's words came to her. "Paint smiles upon faces, Miss Dennison," she seemed to hear him say; and as she moved forward in response to the ripple of smiles that swept the ward, an understanding of the artist's meaning came to her for the first time.

"Pearl! Pearl! Pearl!" rang the children's glad voices, and Portia moved from cot to cot with greetings, while Aldrich's words still seemed to float before her eyes. "Paint a smile upon the face of a child. Paint a smile. Paint a smile." And involuntarily she brushed a hand across her eyes to clear her mental vision.

Chapter XVIII

I AM very glad to see you to-day, Miss Overton," welcomed a white-capped nurse, coming forward. "Little Vena has been pining for you."

Following the nurse's gesture, Portia turned to gaze down into the azure eyes of a tiny girl whose red-gold curls made an aureola around her angel-like face.

"Sister! Sister Pearl!" cried the weak voice of this little girl, and Portia dropped to her knees, to allow the frail arms to clasp themselves around her neck.

"Won't you take me up, Sister Pearl?" begged little Vena, and Portia looked questioningly up at the nurse.

"Anything she wants," nodded the nurse, making haste to draw forward a rocking-chair. Within a few moments the red-gold curls were nestling against Portia's breast, and the little form, so light, so fragile, and so sweet, was resting in her arms.

"I wanted you so," murmured little Vena. "I have been so very tired, Sister Pearl."

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Portia pressed trembling lips to the golden head and upon the little hand that raised itself weakly to pat her cheek. The other children began to clamor for stories and songs, and the nurse seated herself where she could watch little Vena's face.

"I'd like a bear-story," declared the boy with a broken leg.

"Injuns are better," deliberated a boy in the next bed.

"I like the knights of the round table best," remarked the hunchback boy, who was seated, as usual, upon the floor, his useless legs curled under him.

"Sing to us, Pearl," pleaded the little girl over the foot of whose bed hung the iron weights. "Sing about places where cool water runs over stones, and birds sing, and little squirrels run about in the trees."

Portia looked pityingly at the feverish cheeks of this dear little girl, but a lump in her throat refused to dissolve itself, and she wondered how she should be able either to speak or sing. Little Vena smiled up at her lovingly.

"I do n't care what you sing or talk about, as long as you are here," she murmured. "Tell me, Sister Pearl, do you love me?"

A few tears relieved Portia, and she hid

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them in the red-gold curls while she kissed the pure brow and whispered loving assurances which filled the blue eyes with happy light. Then she succeeded in saying, brightly:

"I know about a beautiful place where, if there are bears, I am sure they are not savage; and if there are Indians, they are not cruel; and where all people are as noble as the knights of the round table; and where clear, cool streams ripple over beautiful stones, and the most exquisite birds sing, and happiness is everywhere."

"Are there hospitals there?" inquired a wistful voice. "I wonder if I could be moved."

"Oh, no; people are never sick in that place."

"Nobody? Not ever? Why not, Pearl?"

"Because there is no way to get sick. There is no such thing as sickness, nor sorrow, nor pain, nor trouble of any kind. Just think, darlings, no one ever cries there, because there is nothing to make tears come."

Eager little faces and interest-brightened eyes regarded Portia breathlessly, until the boy with the broken leg broke the spell.

"Oh, you mean heaven," he observed, disparagingly. "You're talking about when we die."

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Clouds fell over each face at his words. All eyes looked at Portia, hoping she would contradict the boy; and when she did not speak, disappointment settled over the ward.

"We never like to think about dying or heaven, Sister Pearl," explained little Vena, gravely. "We try to forget those dreadful things."

"Dreadful?" ejaculated Portia.

"Yes. Oh, we know all about it. A lady comes here sometimes. She brings little papers and reads us dreadful things out of a black book. I turn my back to her if I can move, and when I can't I shut my eyes and my think."

"What does she tell you?" queried Portia, much shocked.

"Oh," interjected the little hunchback before Vena could reply, "she says this is a sinful world, and we must all prepare to die."

His sunken eyes as well as his deepened voice expressed his horror of the last word.

"She says," took up another voice, in tones of awe and fear, "that God has a great, big eye, and it is always everywhere looking at all the naughty things we do. It is right up there in the ceiling, and it sees us even think."

Little Vena shuddered and hid her face in Portia's breast.

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"She says God made us," complained the little girl with the weights, "and I do think He made such a bad job."

"I do n't want to die," suddenly wailed little Vena. "I do n't want to go down into a black hole in the ground."

"Children! Children!" remonstrated Portia. She tenderly turned Vena's beautiful face to the light and kissed away the tears. "Oh, my darling children!" she cried, while the listening nurse vowed grimly to appoint herself a censor of the visiting-list thereafter, "God is n't like that, and heaven is wonderful, and none of you need ever have anything to do with death."

"Never die!" ejaculated one.

They all fixed wondering eyes upon their friend. What she said must be so, since she was she; but it was a difficult thing to comprehend.

"Never die?" repeated little Vena. "But sometimes, Sister Pearl, I am so tired I think I could stand even the black hole."

"My poor darling! Oh, you must n't think, children, that I mean you are to be always just as you are now. I know you will want to be lifted out of these bodies you are in here, because they are such weak, painful little houses

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to live in, are n't they? But that is n't dying. Oh, no, indeed! Jesus died once, you know, and because of His death all of us who believe in Him need never die. We just move out of these bodies we live in now into splendid, strong, new bodies, and we go right on living, only we live in that beautiful, happy place I told you about, where there is no sickness nor sorrow nor crying."

"How do we get there?" questioned little Vena, all aquiver with desire. "Oh, I want to go!"

"We go to sleep, and Jesus takes us," explained Portia. "My uncle has told me a story about it. He says that this world we live in now, where there is so much trouble and sorrow and sin, is only like an inn—a stopping-place, you know, where people just stay for a little while. And outside this inn is a great, big ocean. Some people think this ocean is dreary and dark-looking, with stormy waves and fearful billows; but that is because they look at it only from this shore. If they could view it from the heavenly side, they would see that its surface shines like silver; every wave and foam-tipped billow is glittering with light, and where the water ripples gently upon that farther shore, the sands beneath it are of brightest

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gold. Every pebble is a gem of glittering colors, and from the margin of this ocean we go up into the most beautiful city you could possibly dream about. It is surrounded by a wall which sparkles with millions of jewels of most dazzling colors. Great, wonderful gates of pearl swing open, and as we pass through we find that the very streets of the city are paved with pure gold. There is cool water there, girlie; a pure river, clear as crystal; and it flows by the throne of the King. The King is God, dear children; and you would not be afraid of His loving eyes if you could see how His face lights up the whole of heaven. Of course, He sees us all the time; but we want Him to—do n't we?—when we know that He loves us and is going to take us to that beautiful place to live?"

"Are there people there?" inquired a child.

"And what do they do?" asked another.

"Of course there are people," responded Portia, "and they do whatever they want to do."

"Walk?" quavered a cripple.

"Stand up straight?" murmured the hunchback.

"Run about and play?" breathed the little girl with the weights.

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Portia nodded, the lump in her throat swelling again.

"Are—are any of those people mothers?" ventured little Vena, her eyes deep wells of longing. "Does everybody belong to somebody there?"

Portia pressed the frail form closer. "Yes," she assented. "Mothers are love, and heaven is filled with love. Why, little Vena, in heaven there is no need of a sun or moon to give light, because the love of God the Father is so bright that it is a glory, and fills all the place with a radiance far brighter than the sun. After just one look at His face, little Vena, you will know that you belong to Him."

"Father!" breathed little Vena. "I never said that word before. When, oh, when can I go, Sister Pearl?"

"Perhaps soon," faltered Portia.

"And will you come, too?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, darling; I shall certainly come."

"Well, if I go first, Sister Pearl, I will watch the shore for you. Even if there are mothers there, and a wonderful Father, I'll never forget my Sister Pearl."

The white lids fluttered over the happy, azure eyes, the sweet lips continued to smile

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their love, but extreme weakness overpowered little Vena, and, with her hand still upon Portia's cheek, she fell softly into slumber. The watchful nurse came forward and gently lifted the little form and laid it upon the bed, and with lowered voice Portia made her farewells to the other children. She bent, last of all, over little Vena's bed and pressed a soft kiss upon the smiling face ere she left it. She never saw it again. The slumber which began so lightly became more and more profound, and under its cover at last little Vena took her voyage across the ocean of death. Upon the earthward shore she left her little body like a discarded shell, and on the sweet face still lingered the smile which was painted there by Portia Dennison.

Chapter XIX

ELMER HAMLIN carried out his resolution of following the girls to the city, and upon his arrival there he telephoned at once to Dr. Foster's office. The doctor informed him that Portia would visit the children's ward of the hospital that afternoon, and Elmer's depressed spirits suddenly arose with a bound. Surely, he told himself as he hung up the receiver, Portia—or Pearl, as his heart persisted in naming her—would be so softened by the remembrance of what had occurred in that hospital corridor that she would become her natural self again. He must meet her in that very corridor, he told himself. There, in the spot where she had confessed her love for him, she would explain all the mysteriousness of her conduct. In this hopeful mood he lunched, and then waited impatiently until time to go to the hospital. He aimed to arrive there at about the time she would be leaving the children, and at last set forth. He told the boy who admitted him that he would wait for some one

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himself to be conducted to the waiting-room. who was visiting the patients, and allowed There he hesitated awhile, consulting his watch and wondering whether or not it was time to ascend the stairs. Deciding at last to mount them, he stepped out into the hall, and just at this moment Portia appeared, descending. Her face was lovely with tender emotions, and its gentle expressions did not alter, even at the unexpected sight of the man below. She reached the foot of the stairs and advanced toward him with a sweet, absent smile upon her lips; and, enchanted by her sweetness, he sprang forward and seized her hand.

“Pearl, my darling Pearl!” he cried.

The name of Pearl could nevermore offend Portia. Its music as uttered by the sweet, childish voices above was still in her ears. Nevertheless she drew her hands away with a frown.

“How came you here, Mr. Hamlin?” she asked, coldly.

“I came to see you, Pearl,” he responded, and she sighed impatiently and drew a hand across her brow.

“My name is not Pearl,” she insisted, “and there are so many things that puzzle me.”

“My poor darling!” A surge of protect-

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ing tenderness rose in Elmer's heart, and he threw a loving arm around her. "Tell me all about it," he entreated.

But Portia flung him off with flashing eyes.

"How dare you, Mr. Hamlin!" she flared.

"And why should I not dare?" he retorted.
"Are you not my promised wife?"

The brown eyes widened, and the anger in them gave place to amazement.

"Your promised wife?" she repeated, blankly.

"Yes, my promised wife," he flung back at her. Wrath suddenly possessed him, to the exclusion of all other feelings. A torrent of angry words began to flow from him, but they were stemmed in their flood, not by the sound of the door that opened just then, but by a decided statement from Portia.

"I am engaged to Donald Dennison," she answered, haughtily, standing straight and cold before him.

She turned to the doctor and welcomed him with warmth, passing at once through the door and down the steps. Only lingering to offer Hamlin a ride, which invitation was refused mutely by Elmer, the doctor followed her, and Hamlin was left to digest his disappointment as best he might.

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In the meantime anxiety was rife at the farm. Aunt Caroline, who had not been entirely free from uneasiness when she permitted the girls to depart, became hourly more and more troubled. Suppose they, too, should disappear! The loss of the children had unnerved her, and vague fears oppressed her throughout the whole of an anxious day. Mr. Dennison had been seized with another of his heart-attacks, which, passing, left him weak, and therefore unavailable as a source of comfort; so it was to her son that she communicated her worries. Although Donald strove to reassure her and to reason her out of her fears, he himself became burdened with the same worries. After a sleepless night, throughout which he tossed about in the grip of formless fancies, he arose with a determination to go and find the girls. His mother did not discourage him, and consequently the first train bore him to the city. It was Saturday morning, and the streets were crowded as he walked through them searching out his way to the Emmett residence.

Arriving there, he was informed by Evelyn that both Portia and Margaret had gone out. She was unable to tell him where they had gone, and was surprised at his questions concerning the children. The secret of this sur-

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prise lay in the fact that the girls had hesitated about informing Mr. Emmett of the hopes which had been raised and dashed again, preferring to foster the cheerfulness which had been engendered in him by their visit. Therefore they had said nothing to either him or Evelyn. Margaret's sympathies for her uncle had been aroused to such an extent by his saddened appearance that she had decided to remain in his home instead of returning to the farm.

"Evelyn, although she is trying to be helpful now, is at the best a very poor house-keeper," she observed to Portia "and I believe my duty is here."

All this, however, Donald could not know; therefore the fears, which had subsided at the news that Portia was safe and well, began to rise again at the extraordinary ignorance of Evelyn concerning the children. Were they not found, then? And where was Portia now? Too restless to wait at the house for her return, he betook himself to Dr. Foster's office. Foster must explain to him about the children. The doctor was in, but Donald found him strangely slow about answering his questions. He drew out a chair and pressed refreshments upon his caller. He exhibited a keen interest

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in the state of the weather and in the crop prospect at Oakdale, and it was only when Donald impatiently reiterated his inquiries that he resigned himself to an unwelcome task. Sitting down opposite his interlocutor, he began:

"I am very sorry, Mr. Dennison, that inadvertently I raised false hopes in Miss—er—Miss Dennison's mind about the children. In fact, I was not aware that the little ones from your farm had disappeared."

The impatience on Donald's face gave place to astonishment. "But you telegraphed to Portia," he exclaimed.

"The children in the hospital wanted her," explained the doctor, calmly.

"Hospital! What hospital?"

"The hospital she habitually visits."

"Nonsense! Portia never visits hospitals."

The doctor was silent.

"Portia never visits children in a hospital, I tell you," repeated Donald, impatiently. "How absurd! What kind of a mistake are you making, Dr. Foster?"

"There is no mistake at all. Miss Dennison, or Miss Overton—as she calls herself at times—visits one hospital very frequently."

"Miss Overton!"

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"Yes. Pearl Overton is the name she bears here."

Donald stared at the doctor in angry amazement for a moment, then:

"Man, you are crazy!" he said. "Portia is always at home."

"On Saturdays?"

Donald hesitated only a second. "She never leaves Oakdale on Saturdays," he asserted, with heat.

The doctor smiled pityingly.

"What do you mean?" broke out Donald. His usually quiet disposition seemed to have forsaken him. He fumed with wrath. The doctor leaned forward and spoke sympathetically.

"Indeed, it is painful for me to have to tell you this, Mr. Dennison," he said, "but perhaps it is the greatest kindness I can do you. It has come to my personal knowledge that Miss Dennison, under the name of Pearl Overton, works every Saturday in a branch of the public library in this city."

Donald was pale and speechless for a moment, then he arose. "You are not telling the truth," he remarked, deliberately.

The doctor's eyes flashed, and he com-

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pressed his lips for a second; then he, too, arose.

"This is hard news for you to hear, and I should make allowance for you," he observed, tolerantly. "I can prove my words if you wish me to," he added.

"How?"

"By taking you to the library branch where, no doubt, the young lady is working at this moment. This is Saturday, you know."

Donald clinched his hands and walked to a window. His very soul seemed sick within him. The doctor's voice rang so true, and his manner was so hideously convincing. But after a moment he turned.

"Let us go at once," he requested, shortly.

The walk to the library was a silent one. The buildings, vehicles, pedestrians, even the sidewalk beneath his feet were invisible to Donald. The city-noises made no sound in his ears. He walked ahead blindly, mechanically obeying the doctor's touch upon his elbow at the turnings. He was reviewing over and over in his mind the story the doctor had told him, and trying to imagine Portia—his innocent little Portia—with a mantle of deceit around her. At moments he felt a savage impulse to turn and strangle the man at his side for having told

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him so monstrous a tale; and ever, as he restrained himself, he dwelt with grim satisfaction upon the punishment he would surely mete out to him should his story prove false.

It was too early for many people to be in the library. A few children were scattered about at the tables, but the librarian herself had not yet arrived, and only the young assistant was present. She was standing at a shelf straightening some books, and she turned toward the door as the two young men entered. Donald stopped suddenly in his tracks. A choking sensation gripped his throat, and the walls and ceiling seemed about to fall upon him. In that bitter moment of certainty he realized how strong had been his doubts of the doctor's story. Nothing short of his own sight could have convinced him of Portia's perfidy, and he even doubted his own senses now. Surely he must be in a dream, he reflected, dully. The beautiful girl who had advanced until she now stood before him, familiar brown eyes looking into his with an unrecognizing gaze, must be only the unsubstantial creature of a dream. She could not be his Portia. But her voice broke the spell.

"Good morning, Dr. Foster!" she said.
"Do you want a book?"

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The doctor looked somewhat awkwardly at his companion, and Donald drew a long, sick breath, such as one takes when coming out of a chloroform stupor. He cast his eyes scrutinizingly over the face and form before him, and the girl testified to her consciousness of his gaze by the painful blush which stained her cheeks. She turned away modestly, but his voice arrested her.

"Portia," he cried, sharply, "what are you doing here?"

She made no reply, only looked inquiringly at Dr. Foster, while her hand went up to play somewhat nervously with a chain which encircled her neck.

"Where did you find your chain?" came Donald's next very natural question. To see the lost chain glittering about her neck was almost as astonishing as to find her here.

But again the girl did not answer, and he demanded, more insistently:

"Portia, tell me instantly what this means. Is it true that you have been working in this place Saturdays for weeks or months—"

"Only three months," she faltered, "but—"

Donald turned away with a groan. "I owe you an apology, Dr. Foster," he acknowledged, bitterly. "What you said was true."

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His face was so ghastly that the doctor involuntarily drew forward a chair; but, shaking off the friendly hand, Donald started for the door. Before reaching it, however, he turned back again. He must not leave Portia here. She must be taken home at any rate.

"Get your hat, Portia!" he ordered, imperiously.

But the young girl had rallied herself now. Her golden-brown head reared itself haughtily, and her brown eyes flashed defiantly back into Donald's.

"I do not understand what you mean," she said, coldly.

"I mean that you are to come home with me at once, of course," he replied. "Do you suppose I shall leave you here?"

She turned away with a gesture of proud refusal, and Donald's brow grew black.

"Portia," he commanded, approaching her angrily, "get your hat instantly, and come with me!"

"My name is not Portia," she affirmed, with heat, "and most certainly I shall not go anywhere with you. I never saw you before."

The strength suddenly seemed to forsake Donald's limbs. He grasped the back of a chair for support.

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"Portia!" he gasped. "Not know me?
Am I not your promised husband?"

She flashed scornful eyes at him. "The
name of the man I am going to marry is Elmer
Hamlin," she announced, with cold disdain.

Chapter XX

SO white was Donald's face that Dr. Foster drew him out upon the sidewalk; but there Donald paused. What should he do? he asked himself, wretchedly.

"I must not leave her here," he muttered.

"But," reasoned the doctor, "she has never come to harm yet. Does n't she always return to the farm safely on Monday mornings?"

"But what of her Sundays?" groaned Donald.

"No doubt her friends—" the doctor hesitated and reddened a trifle, while Donald, with sharpened perspicacity, read his thoughts aright.

"Hamlin," he said, through shut teeth; "has that scoundrel known all along?"

"Mr. Hamlin knows about the young lady's —er—peculiarities," confessed the doctor. "At first he believed that her mind must be in some way affected."

"And is it not?" cried Donald, catching gladly at the straw. "Surely that must be the

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explanation of her behavior. Poor, poor little Portia!"

He started for the door impetuously, but the doctor's words stayed his steps.

"The young lady's mind is perfectly clear," declared Foster, with decision.

After a little more conversation Donald, following the doctor's advice, decided to return to Oakdale upon the first train, since he could do no good by remaining in the city. The two men walked up the street together toward the Emmett residence, and when within a couple of blocks they were met by Margaret Adams. A very excited Margaret she was, with dark eyes wide, and a vivid glow upon her face. So possessed was she by some emotion that she failed to be surprised even at the unexpected sight of Donald.

"Oh, I have found the children! I have found the children!" she cried, joyously, as she came near the men. "But I have lost them again, too," she added, with a quick change to despair.

"How is that?" inquired the doctor, interestedly, and even Donald's lackluster eye brightened a trifle.

"Well," related Margaret, "I was on my way to market this morning—Evelyn dislikes

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the very thought of groceries, and I love them —Portia was out; so I went alone. I was sauntering along, enjoying the walk, when I suddenly heard my name called. I looked around, not knowing where the sound came from, when my name rang out again—this time in a voice which I recognized unmistakably as Earl's. Then I caught a glimpse of the dear little fellow. He stood in front of a store, waving his hat at me, and the sun was bright in his curls. Amy stood beside him, waving her hand vigorously, and as I started forward they began to run toward me. But just at that moment a big, dark woman came out of the store and grasped them each by an arm and dragged them into the store. I pushed my way through the crowd and got into the store as quickly as I could, but I could n't find a trace of any of them. I inquired of everybody, but it was all of no use. The woman had spirited the children away somehow. I did n't know what to do, but I found a telephone and called up Uncle Emmett, and after I had told him I ran home to tell Evelyn and Portia. Portia is still out," she added, as an afterthought.

Donald sighed heavily, but the doctor spoke with hearty encouragement.

"Since you have seen the children, and know

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that they are well and unhurt, every one concerned will be greatly relieved," he said, "and your story will give the detective a clue to work with. Do you know," he continued, "I am something of a detective myself. I believe I could trace those children."

"I wish you would," replied Margaret, with heartfelt emphasis.

"Will you constitute yourself my adviser and helper if I try?" he asked.

"I will, indeed," she promised.

"Then I will make the attempt," he declared.

This promise of the doctor's had to be Margaret's only comfort that day, because no headway was made by Mr. Emmett nor the detectives he hastily summoned in unraveling the mystery. Had the children and their captor dissolved into thin air, they could not more totally have disappeared.

But while the search for the children was being made, and while Donald, heartsick and anxious, took his way homeward, Elmer Hamlin was enjoying more happiness than had fallen to his lot for a long time. Upon reaching his office after parting from Margaret and Donald, Dr. Foster had at once telephoned to Hamlin, telling him something of what had occurred

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at the library. Elmer could scarcely believe his ears, but he seized his hat and departed posthaste for the library, with his head in a delighted whirl. Pearl had repulsed Donald Dennison! She had declared her love for him, Elmer, in no uncertain terms! She had acknowledged him as her affianced husband! He could scarcely credit it. Love and joy lent wings to his feet, and it was not long before he was pushing open the library door with eager fingers. The glance he sent searching for Pearl was slightly fearful, despite himself; but all anxiety vanished in an instant as she came quickly toward him. Joy and welcome lighted up her sweet face, and she put out her hands confidently.

"Oh, Elmer," she murmured, "I am so glad you have come!"

He grasped the little hands, unable for a moment to speak.

"A man was here," she faltered, "a dreadful man, with Dr. Foster."

"Donald," he nodded.

"Do you know him?"

Elmer dropped her hands and frowned a little. She was going to persist in her foolish effort to deceive him then, was she? But she pleaded, wistfully:

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"Do n't be angry with me to-day, please, Elmer. I am so distressed. So many things puzzle me."

Hamlin recalled the other interview in which she had complained of being puzzled, but he remembered, too, the reception his attempt at giving comfort had received then; so he held himself in check, although his heart yearned to console her. Evidently disappointed, she looked at him with gentle reproach.

"Elmer," she entreated, "tell me what it all means."

"All what?"

"Why—why, sometimes you are strange to me and call me Portia, and now this man does the same thing, and even Dr. Foster looks at me oddly." Big tears began to arise. "Sometimes," she trembled, "sometimes I almost believe I am crazy."

Elmer's heart melted within him. "Dearest," he comforted, drawing her behind a friendly bookcase, "do n't fret your darling little heart about the matter." Inwardly he was anathematizing his own stupidity. Most certainly this sweet girl was a trifle deranged. What did Dr. Foster know about the matter. He was but an ordinary practitioner, not specially skilled in diagnosing delicate brain affec-

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tions. A specialist was the only person competent to pronounce in a case like Pearl's. One thing was certain, the trouble could not be in the darling's heart; that, of a surety, was guileless and true. The difficulty, therefore, must be in the brain, and it was cruel to distress her.

The comfort he administered behind the shielding case proved so efficacious that the girl emerged rosy and happy-eyed.

Then ensued two days of almost unalloyed happiness for the two. Hamlin decided that during the next week he would persuade Pearl to go with him to see a brain specialist, and that during the time intervening he would avoid all topics that had a tendency to distress her. He passed the rest of that morning reading at a table where he could watch her as she went about her work, and many were the little excuses she manufactured for errands to his corner of the room. At noon they lunched merrily together at a restaurant, after which a thrilling half-hour was spent in selecting an engagement ring. Despite Elmer's curiosity he refrained from inquiring into the fate of Donald's ring, which he saw, with satisfaction, was absent from her finger. He also forbore to question her about the chain which he was

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surprised to see hanging about her neck. In the afternoon so great was his content that he was able to concentrate his mind upon his neglected literary work, and, seated at the library table, he wrote steadily for hours, raising his head often to refresh his eyes with a glimpse of his darling's face. At six o'clock they again visited a restaurant, returning to the library, where Pearl was immediately engulfed in the Saturday evening rush for books, which lasted until the library closed, at ten o'clock. But the time did not drag to Hamlin. Inspiration was upon him, and he wrote at high pressure, oblivious of the crowds which pressed around him, not hearing the hum of voices nor feeling the elbows which jostled him as others came and went at his table. When closing-time arrived, he folded up his papers with a sigh, but it was followed by a breath of joy at the sight of Pearl, and the walk to her door through the night was a happy one. On Sunday he was allowed to call twice to take her to church, but on neither of those times, nor in the afternoon, when he called to take her for a walk, did he see any one at the house save herself. During the walk was the only time when he allowed himself to mention any name that might serve to distress her. Once, after they had passed

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a group of people, he looked back after them and remarked, reflectively:

"Those people do n't look as though this world was only an inn, do they?"

"An inn?"

"Do n't you remember Uncle Harry's allegory?" he queried. "I thought you were all for achieving some wonderful deed while you remained your little day in this inn."

"Wonderful deed! Oh, no," she corrected him, gravely; "I thought that all out when I had my flower garden, before we moved to the city. It was my first experience in planting seeds, and I determined to raise something wonderful in my garden. I despised the common flowers, such as every one could raise and which were sure to bloom. To be sure, I put in a good many common seeds, because I had plenty of space, but I devoted the most of my time and attention to novelties—wonderful things which I saw advertised in catalogues. But before the summer was over I had learned my lesson. My common plants had grown and bloomed, and the whole yard was bright and sweet with them; but my extraordinary ones fell far below my expectations. Some had died altogether, and the others gave me only a sparse show of puny, stunted blossoms for my

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pains. As I looked over my garden I saw that it was the common, ordinary flowers that made it beautiful, and I came to the conclusion that it was the common, ordinary people who make the garden of the world bright and sweet. Now and then an extraordinary person appears, just as occasionally in a garden some wonderful plant will grow. But as for me, Elmer, I am content to be just a common garden variety of girl."

Chapter XXI

PORTIA looked around the depot platform a trifle wistfully as she stepped from the train the next morning, but no one was there to meet her. It seemed to her that she had been away a long time, and her heart felt a little sore as she climbed the hill. The road, overhung by green branches, was cool and shady, and Portia's feet sank softly into the grass as she walked at the side, avoiding the dust. Squirrels frisked bushy tails and chattered at her, and robins, too busy feeding their families to sing, eyed her with sharp, black eyes; but Portia was too full of memories to notice them. Her lips trembled as she passed the place where Hamlin had found her and Amy crowning each other with daisies one morning. Dear gypsy Amy! Where was she now? The place where the children had "buyed" and lost again the yellow dog was hurried past with dim eyes, and when Portia emerged from the trees at the top of the hill she looked lonesomely in every direction for a sight of Donald. But he was no-

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where in sight, and Portia went into the house, where she was almost shocked by Aunt Caroline's appearance. That lady was so pale and weary-looking that Portia decided at once to repress her desire to talk about her own troubles and act as comforter instead. Donald, who had also been observant of his mother's weariness, had adopted the same resolution, and therefore had said nothing to her about the inexplicable conduct of Portia in the city. Mrs. Dennison, therefore, after a half-hour's conversation with Portia, still remained a little mystified about Dr. Foster's error in thinking he had found the lost children.

"But, darling, why did the doctor send for you?" was one of her natural questions.

"He wanted some one to visit a children's ward in which he was interested, and—and he took me to the hospital," was Portia's reply.

"But to send away out in the country for you—a stranger! What did he mean?"

"I do n't know, Aunt Caroline; but, oh, I am so glad he did!"

"Glad, dear?"

"Yes, and so would you be if you had seen those sick, lonely little children. Can't we have some of them here at the farm for awhile when

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they get better, and when Uncle Henry gets well enough, so it would n't trouble him?"

"Certainly we can, darling. They may come as often and stay as long as you like. But—"

"Mrs. Aldrich gave me some money before she went away—I'll tell you all about it some time—and I want to spend it in making children happy in some way."

"Anything of that kind that pleases you will please your uncle and me, too, dear; but still I do n't understand Dr. Foster at all. Well, I must go back to your uncle now. What a comfort it is to have you at home again, Portia!"

Portia found Lizzie Smith in the kitchen, and so many duties claimed her attention that it did not seem long before the noon-hour arrived and Donald was to be seen approaching the house. Portia ran a few steps down the path to meet him. Her face was wreathed with smiles, and she held up glad arms toward his neck. But with an icy face and haughty step the young man passed her without a glance and went into the kitchen. Her arms dropped slowly to her sides, and for a moment or two she stood still where he had passed her. A gentle breeze shook the leaves over her head,

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and the pungent scent from the tansy-bed was wafted about her. The little wren alighted for a moment in the maple-tree, and then flew, with a burst of jubilant song, to his cosy little home in the vines. Portia slowly moved. The shocked pain left her eyes. She stilled the trembling of her lips and walked back into the kitchen. Donald was now in a little room adjoining, plunging his face into water. But the severe look was not washed from his countenance, and when he took his seat at the table he ignored Portia entirely. Aunt Annabelle, however, was loquacious enough to make up for any one's taciturnity. She expressed herself as disgusted with Margaret for choosing to remain in the city.

"If three of them are going to live there," she grumbled, "they will require servants and all the other expenses of housekeeping. I suppose I may as well go home myself. I wanted to save a little money this summer, but I suppose there is no help for it."

"If only little Earl could be found, all other troubles would seem as nothing to you, Annabelle," sympathized Aunt Caroline.

"If Earl had not run away, all this trouble would have been avoided," snapped Mrs. Emmett. "Now, with the money which will have

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to be paid out for his recovery, we shall indeed be pinched next winter. You can not understand these things, Caroline, since you are not in society."

Aunt Caroline sought in vain for a reply, and, finding the conversation languishing, Donald offered a remark.

"I am sorry you are having so dull a visit here, Aunt Annabelle," he said. "Father will soon be around again now, and then we shall all feel more cheerful."

Aunt Annabelle sniffed. "Your father will never be well again," she declared, baldly. "His case is hopeless. You ought to be making plans for the future, Caroline. What shall you do? Sell the farm or continue to live on here?"

Aunt Caroline's face grew so white and Portia's eyes blazed with such wrath that even the calloused heart of Aunt Annabelle smote its owner, although the stroke was feeble.

"Pooh! Pooh!" she scoffed, impatiently. "How absurd not to be able to bear plain speaking! We all have to die when our time comes. And now, to change the subject, can you take me to the depot this afternoon, Donald?"

Donald assured her that he could, and the lips with which Aunt Caroline strove to speak

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were so stiff that she was obliged to leave unuttered all protestations against her guest's sudden departure.

Mrs. Emmett left that afternoon. Donald took her to the depot in the automobile; but, although Portia stood upon the porch when they left, and gazed appealingly at Donald, he vouchsafed her not one look. The girl watched the auto as it whizzed down the hill, and then turned piteously to Aunt Caroline, who had also come to the porch to speed the parting guests. Tears would no longer be withheld, and Portia hid them in Aunt Caroline's neck.

"Aunty, did—did you notice Donald?" she sobbed.

"Yes, darling; what is the trouble?"

"He—he won't speak to me!"

Aunt Caroline patted the shaking shoulder.
"There, there, dear; do n't cry," she soothed.

"He—he won't even look at me!"

"What is the trouble, dearest?"

"I do n't know."

"Possibly Donald is jealous," mused Aunt Caroline.

"Jealous!" Portia raised a wet, surprised face. "What possible cause could Donald find for jealousy?" she asked.

Aunt Caroline looked searchingly into the

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brown eyes. "You know best about that, dear," she replied.

"But truly, Aunt Caroline, I have never given Donald the slightest reason to be jealous. Oh, no; it must be something else."

"Perhaps, darling. But I have sometimes wondered if it was not a little hard for Donald to bear Elmer Hamlin's ardent looks at you."

"Elmer Hamlin!" A pinkness flushed Portia's neck, her cheeks grew crimson, and the rosy tide swept up to the soft curls on her forehead. Again she plunged her face into the comfortable neck.

"Oh, Aunt Caroline," she whispered, "maybe I ought to tell you what Mr. Hamlin said to me the other day."

But before further words could be exchanged, Uncle Henry's voice was heard calling his wife, and Aunt Caroline was forced to hurry away.

The little family was alone for the evening meal. Uncle Henry declared himself able to be wheeled out to the table, and in the loving attentions showered upon him by all, the coldness between the two young people was unnoticed by him. To Portia's dismay, she heard Donald telling his father that he must leave

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home the following morning, to be absent upon business connected with the farm for the rest of the week. She could not let him go away angry with her, she reflected, miserably. She eyed him wistfully when he took the milk-pails after supper, and she placed herself in his way on the porch as he left the house. But, had she been a post, he could not have noticed her less. He spent the evening in his own room, and she cried herself to sleep. But in the morning she went downstairs with determination in her eye. He should not go away without speaking to her. She found no opportunity of seeing him alone, however, until the moment of his departure; then, desperate, she ran after him as he went toward his automobile.

"Donald! O Don!" she cried.

The strong hint of tears in her voice stayed Donald's feet against his will. He paused, and she came up to him.

"Oh, Donald, please, please do n't leave me in this way," she pleaded, laying clinging hands on his arm.

He remained grimly silent, and she continued:

"What are you angry about, Don? What have I done?"

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"What have you done!"

He attempted to shake off her hands angrily, but she clung more tightly.

Truly, I have n't meant to offend you, Donald. Is it—is it—Mr. Hamlin?"

His eyes met hers with such a flash that she hid her face against his arm.

"You have misunderstood me, Donald," she moaned. "I care nothing whatever for Elmer Hamlin. I could explain it all if there was time."

"You would have a great deal to explain, Portia."

"Would I? Have I been so bad?"

"Bad! Really, Portia, you ought to know that your conduct has been insufferable."

"I am so sorry, Donald. But you must n't be so cruel as to go away angry. Please forgive me, dear, and I will never displease you again."

The tearful face, so submissive, so sweet, melted Donald's heart, and he suddenly gathered the girl into his arms.

"Will you give it all up?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes," she promised largely, and after a long embrace they were forced to part.

"When I return I shall require a full con-

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fession," he said, with a last attempt at sternness, as he entered his car, and she smiled up at him radiantly.

"You shall have it, Sir Tyrant. Good-bye, dear Donald! Good-bye"

Chapter XXII

THE family at the farm looked daily for a letter from Margaret containing news of the lost children, but none arrived that week. Portia received two cards from Mrs. Huntington relative to Agnes Ilverton's condition. The first told of her arrival at the Huntington home, and the second stated that the operation was to be performed the coming Saturday. Portia longed to go to Agnes. She felt that her presence would be a comfort to her friend during the trying ordeal, but the thought of seeing Agnes before Amy was found held her back. Nothing must be allowed to agitate Agnes at this critical time, and she feared that, no matter how guarded she should try to be, she might let slip some word which would arouse the mother's suspicions. On Friday a letter from Mrs. Huntington arrived, containing an urgent invitation for Portia to come. Ruth said that Portia could do much toward brightening the time which Agnes would have to spend blindfolded after the operation, and she added, as

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an inducement, the information that Professor Zeigler, the musical genius of whom she had spoken, was now in the city.

"Perhaps," she wrote, "music is your forte, instead of art. I should like to have you hear Mrs. Morris, Professor Zeigler's daughter, sing. Her voice might inspire you. I hope to have the professor and his daughter here to dine some night, and I should be delighted to present you."

Portia read and reread this letter. Music, she reflected; oh, if she could but excel in this divine art! What an influence she might exert! What sorrows she might drown! To move a multitude of souls by the power of her voice! Ah, such a task were fit for angels! More than her desire to write, stronger than her wish to paint grew a sudden mighty longing in her heart to sing. She sat breathless as she imagined herself standing before a vast audience, holding them spellbound with her voice. She grew weak with ecstasy as she pictured the tears, the hopes, the prayers which her songs might bring into being. Her resolution was suddenly taken. She would go to the city. She would sing for Professor Zeigler. If he pronounced her voice good, she would study and practice as no girl ever studied and practiced

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before, and she would become a great and wonderful singer who would move the world.

Donald returned home that night, and at the supper-table Portia announced her determination to accept Mrs. Huntington's invitation for the coming week. Donald and his father were discussing the former's business trip when Portia made her announcement in a low tone to Aunt Caroline; but her words reached her lover's ears, and he dropped alike his conversation and his knife and fork to gaze at her in angry amazement. She changed color.

"Oh, did you hear me, Don?" she inquired, lightly. "I was just telling Aunty that I am going to the city to-morrow morning."

The blood rushed to Donald's forehead, but for fear of agitating his father he crushed back the words that crowded to his lips, and took up the conversation he had dropped.

After supper she gayly seized one of the milk-pails and danced at his side along the path; but under the maple-tree he resolutely paused.

"Portia," he demanded, "did you mean what you said at the table?"

"Why, of course I did, Donald, dear. I surely ought to go to Agnes. Besides, I want to."

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Donald's lips set in a straight line.

"Portia," he warned, "if you go to the city once again you are through with me."

She looked at him reproachfully.

"Why, Donald," she protested, "how unkind!"

But his look grew only the sterner.

"Decide this thing once for all, Portia," he said. "If you go to-morrow, everything is over between us."

Picking up the pails, he strode quickly away down the path, and she was left standing alone, pale and angry, beneath the spreading maple-tree.

Early the next morning she took her departure. One of the hired men drove her to the depot, and Donald, coming from the stables to breakfast, grew white as he heard the whistle of the train which bore her away.

The operation upon Mrs. Ilverton's eyes had proved satisfactory in every respect, and she was now comfortably resting in Mrs. Huntington's home. She was very glad to have Portia with her, and her gratitude for all the kindnesses that had been showered upon her was almost beyond expression. Portia spent nearly all her time in the darkened chamber, and Mrs. Huntington flashed in and out many

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times a day with spicy accounts of outside happenings. Agnes had been satisfied by Portia's assurance that Amy was well the last time she saw her, and fervently Portia prayed that before the mother was able to go home the little girl might be found. She began nervously to talk of the first subject which entered her mind whenever the name of Amy was mentioned.

"It will not be long before I am able to work again," observed Agnes happily one day. "How thankful I am! I shall sew and sew and sew until I get even with the world again."

"You are very grateful for the privilege of working, Agnes," returned Portia, almost resentfully. "I can't feel as you do. I want to work, of course, but I want something higher than ordinary drudgery to do. Sewing! Ugh!"

Agnes smiled gently.

"Lift the stone, and thou shalt find Me;
Cleave the wood, and there am I;"

she quoted, musingly.

Portia was interested. "What an odd quotation!" she remarked. "I never heard it before. What is it from?"

"It is something that has been discovered in the Holy Land," informed Agnes. "I believe people have been excavating there. At

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any rate these words are supposed to have been uttered by Christ."

"By Christ?" marveled Portia. "But why should you have thought them applicable to our conversation? 'Lift the stone, and thou shalt find Me; cleave the wood, and there am I.' Why, that only means that geologists and botanists can find traces of Christ's work in the formation of stones and in the curious rings in the wood of trees, which tells how they grew."

"It may mean that, too," assented Agnes. "It must be interesting in the extreme to trace Christ's footprints through the material universe; but I think the text means more than that. 'Lift the stone, and thou shalt find Me;' I believe that every one who lifts the every-day burdens of life, does what you call the drudgery, finds Christ at his side as a Helper. 'Cleave the wood, and there am I;' I think that the 'hewers of wood and the drawers of water,' the people who perform the humblest tasks of life, may see, as they cheerfully work, the Son of man, who never leaves us alone,"

"But, Agnes," impatiently, "is it right to just live on doing trivial little things day in and day out? I want to do something big for Jesus Christ."

"I believe it is more important to let Him

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do big things for us, Portia. And He can do that while we are attending to the duties we find in our way. Look at Mrs. Huntington. She just lets Christ work through her."

"Dear Mrs. Huntington!" murmured Portia. "She lives in one of the beautiful rooms of the inn, does n't she?" she added reflectively.

"The inn your uncle talks about?" queried Agnes. "Was there something about rooms in it, Portia? Tell me about it, please."

"Oh, yes, the inn was divided into many different rooms. Some were elegantly furnished, some more moderately, and some very poorly. There was one place in particular which was far from being pleasant. It was a big, bare, draughty hall; cold, and with scarcely any furniture. Here the people often suffered from privations, and many of them looked enviously from time to time at the seemingly more fortunate people who occupied the comfortable apartments. This common hall, however, had its advantages. The pearls which the King loved to see upon the traveler's garments were more easily gathered here than anywhere else in the inn, and the waves of the great ocean outside were heard so continuously that the sound became familiar and ceased to terrify.

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The common hall must have been approved highly by the Great King, too, because when the Prince, His Son, came to spend a day in the inn, it was in the common hall that He took up His abode."

"Oh, Portia, after that, how can you look down upon common things!"

Portia laughed and stirred a trifle restlessly.

"Shall I sing for you awhile, Agnes?" she asked. Receiving an eager assent, she went across the hall to Mrs. Huntington's dressing-room. She often sang to Agnes, sitting at a piano here, and consequently the curtains in the hall and dressing-room were all drawn, in order that Agnes's door might be left open. Sitting in the dim light, Portia began to sing, and as her voice swelled out her hopes and ambitions arose with it.

The wonderful professor of whom Mrs. Huntington had told her was now in the city. Any day he might be expected at the Huntingtons'. Portia's heart bounded as she thought of it. She was determined to have Professor Zeigler hear her sing. If he pronounced her voice good, how she would study and practice and work to perfect herself in this divinest of all arts! If? Ah, surely he must decide in her favor! How she longed to stand before

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a vast assemblage and move hearts at her will! How she desired to awaken noble impulses, soften sorrows, encourage, uplift, and inspire people by her singing! Such a privilege might be coveted by angels, she told herself. Under the impetus of her reflections her voice soared to the extent of its ability. Forgetful of Agnes and her bandaged eyes, oblivious of everything save her own ambitions and dreams, deaf even to the sounds of arrival in the hall below, she suddenly realized that she was singing better than she had ever sung before. At the end of the song her hands dropped from the keyboard and she murmured to herself:

"Ah, if Professor Zeigler had but heard me then! He would have had a sample of my best to judge from. I wonder what he would have said."

Arising, she went out into the hall, and for the first time became aware of voices below.

"A friend of mine," she heard Ruth Huntington saying. "Do you like her voice, Professor Zeigler?"

No reply reached Portia's ears, but the name she had heard sent every drop of her blood quivering to her heart. Trembling with excitement, she leaned against the bannister for support, and again Ruth's voice floated up to her:

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"Do tell me what you think, Professor Zeigler. Now, I myself consider her voice lovely."

A snort which caused Portia's lips to whiten was the only response audible; but now a new voice, a voice flute-like and silvery came to her ears.

"Father is hypercritical, Ruth," extenuated this voice. "*I thought that singing was beautiful.*"

"Tut-tut, little girl; hypercritical indeed!" rolled up deep tones, which Ruth's sick heart told her were Professor Zeigler's. "That voice has no merit whatever. A good enough voice to talk with, no doubt, but utterly worthless for singing."

Chapter XXIII

HOW Portia reached the dressing-room again she never knew; but when Lillie Morris entered it, shortly after, to remove her hat, she was startled by the sound of sobs. The room was so dim that at first she was unable to locate the sound; but as her eyes became used to the darkness, she perceived that they emanated from a figure which was flung prone upon a lounge. A sweeping glance, which took in the open piano and the nearness of the staircase, told Mrs. Morris the story, and she bit into her red lip and held her breath a moment as she thought of the pain which her father's words had doubtless inflicted. Retreating softly, she flew down the stairs again and burst in upon Ruth and the old professor, who were just settling themselves for a visit in the drawing-room.

"Father; oh, Father!" she gasped.

"What is it?" he cried, starting up in alarm.

"Such a dreadful thing! Upstairs the girl

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who sang is crying. She must have heard what you said about her voice. "Oh, dear, what shall we do?"

The professor's consternation almost matched his daughter's, and Ruth essayed comfort.

"Never mind," she consoled. "It certainly was not your fault. It was mine, if any one's. I should not have asked your opinion in the hall."

"But why should she mind, anyway?" frowned the professor, testily. "Can't she enjoy herself and her singing regardless of what an old man like me thinks about it?"

"But, Professor Zeigler," explained Ruth, gravely, "the truth is Miss Dennison has been waiting to have you hear her sing. If you gave her the slightest encouragement, she intended to take up music as a career."

"Career!" snorted the old professor. "I detest the word! Why is it always the people without voices who persist in craving musical careers, while others, like my little girl here, care nothing about them!"

"But, father, I do love my voice," protested his daughter, reproachfully. "It makes me very happy to sing for you and other people."

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The professor smiled. "You do n't know the meaning of the word 'career,' little girl," he observed, indulgently.

"Well, I know that poor girl upstairs is crying as though her heart would break," grieved Lillie. "What can we do about it?"

"I will go up and see her," said Ruth, rising somewhat nervously; but the professor interposed:

"Since it was I who caused the tears, let me make an attempt to dry them. Have I your permission to go upstairs, Mrs. Huntington?"

"Certainly, Professor Zeigler, if you really will be so kind. Poor Portia! I am afraid she is very disappointed."

Portia's tears were still flowing when she heard a step on the threshold. Starting up, she attempted to draw back into the deepest shadows of the room; but the intruder, whom she discerned to be a man of stately stature, strode directly to the windows and threw up the shades.

"Oh, Agnes's eyes! Agnes's eyes!" cried Portia, springing to close the door; and the professor smiled as she turned her tear-stained face to him.

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"So," he commented, approvingly, "the grieved one is able to forget herself for another. Very good indeed."

Portia glanced shrinkingly up at the silver-haired old gentleman before her. How kind his eyes were! How handsome his face! He came toward her and, taking her hand, led her to a seat upon the lounge.

"And pray, whose eyes have I been in danger of injuring?" he inquired, with concern.

Portia felt tongue-tied in the presence of this old gentleman, whom she knew must be the one who just pronounced so mercilessly against her voice; but the charm of his personality was irresistible. Soon she found herself telling him about Agnes and her eyes, a story to which he listened with sympathetic interest.

"And this was the friend to whom you were singing when the old professor spoke so unkindly about your voice, was it?" he inquired, gently, when she had finished.

Her face flushed crimson, and she hid it in her hands, beginning to tremble.

"My hasty tongue has never grown old with the rest of my body," continued the professor, with whimsical impatience at himself. "It is forever giving me trouble by saying the

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thing that were better left unsaid. Can you forgive an old man's churlish words, my child?"

Portia sought her handkerchief and dried her tears hastily.

"Oh, please do n't blame yourself," she protested. "It is only that I am so—so disappointed."

"Why so, my dear child?"

"I—I wanted to be a great singer," she confessed, tears threatening again. "I wanted to help people by my voice."

"That you may surely do," assured the old professor, and Portia looked up, surprised. He smiled.

"While I can not retract my words enough to say that you have a specially excellent voice for singing, I may say that it is of sufficient caliber and sweetness to give pleasure to all who love you. Move strangers with it you probably could not. Study and time would be wasted in an attempt to make a prima donna of you. But if you do the best you can with the voice you have, many, like the friend across the hall, will bless you and your singing."

Portia's face was still troubled, and he added, encouragingly, "Is the song of the robin less sweet because that of the nightingale is grander?"

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Still Portia's face did not clear. When one has the ambitions of the nightingale, it is not cheering to think of the limitations of the robin. The professor read her thoughts.

"I wonder," he said, reflectively, "whether you have ever given much thought to your life-song, my child?"

"My life-song?" repeated Portia, much puzzled.

"Yes, we are all singing, as best we may, in the great song of life. I can understand your feeling when you say you would like to help your fellow-creatures through the power of vocal music. One is indeed blessed if he may stand before an audience and by his voice charm away sorrow and inspire high and noble impulses in his hearers' breasts. But at the longest a singer can only pour forth his voice for an hour or two at a time. Soon, from very weariness, he must cease, and immediately time, with its blunting influence, begins to erase from the souls of the hearers the impressions made by the singing. But when one makes of his life—his every-day life, my child—a song, the sweetness of it, the uplifting influence of it, may flow on unbroken from day to week, from month to year; and more good, immeasurably more good, may be accomplished by

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a life-song than by any music breathed forth by a human voice, no matter how perfect that voice may be."

This and more the professor said to Portia as he sat beside her on the lounge. Under his benign influence her heart at last settled into calm, and finally she was able to smile cheerfully up into his fine old face. Presently they descended the stairs together, and Portia was introduced to Mrs. Morris, a vivacious young lady of great charm.

Had any one told Portia, when she was weeping on the lounge upstairs, that she would enjoy herself that evening, she would have scorned the idea. Nevertheless such proved to be the case. It was impossible for her to feel herself a stranger with people who took her so warmly into their friendship, and she found every moment of their society pleasant. After dinner Lillie Morris, standing where her voice might float upward to Agnes's darkened chamber, sang several songs, and her voice was a revelation to Portia. Simply as a child, yet grandly as an angel, the singer poured forth her glorious tones, and the notes of them rose, interlaced, and fell in a shower of liquid clearness that caused a pleasure akin to pain in her hearers. Portia was very silent after the

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music, and the professor sat down beside her, smiling kindly into her wide, brown eyes.

"A life-song is as beautiful, and never needs to cease," he reminded her, softly. Her lips trembled a trifle and, turning, he called to his daughter:

"Little girl, come over here and tell our new friend what you consider the most beautiful influence that ever came into your life."

Lillie came at her father's bidding and, sinking into a low chair, looked inquiringly up into his face.

"You have heard some of the most wonderful voices in the world, little girl," said the professor. "Tell me, has the singing you have heard influenced you more than anything else that has come into your life?"

"Oh, no, father, dear. I have loved it, of course; but you know what it was that exerted the most powerful influence over me. It was the life of Lillie Dorchester."

"Lillie Dorchester?" repeated Portia. "I never heard of her. Who was she? Some great or noted woman?"

Mrs. Morris laughed, although tender tears swam in her eyes. "Great woman!" she murmured. "My little crippled Lillie a great or noted woman! Oh, no, Miss Dennison," she

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continued, "Lillie Dorchester was only a young invalid, shut in and known by but a few people. I was one of those fortunate people. She loved me when I was alone and friendless and sad, and she showed her love in such sweet fashion that I was encouraged to try to rise out of the mire in which I was born."

Portia looked involuntarily at the stately and aristocratic Professor Zeigler.

"I am an adopted daughter," explained Mrs. Morris, answering the look. "Father's hand helped me to rise later, but my first help came from my darling Lillie."

"And you, in turn, helped me," put in Ruth, leaning forward interestedly.

"And Mrs. Huntington is helping so many people," commented Portia. "Oh, Professor Zeigler, was Lillie Dorchester's life a song?"

The professor assented, and Ruth touched Mrs. Morris gently on the arm.

"Is not this dear friend living yet?" she asked, softly.

"She is living, I am certain, but not here," was the reply. "She went to her heavenly home several years ago. But why do I say she is not living here also? Surely she lives still by her influence, which will never cease as long as I am alive."

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Lillie looked wistfully up at her father for confirmation of her words, and he nodded thoughtfully.

"Science tells us," he observed, "that a star does not set or disappear as soon as it passes below the horizon. It continues in view by means of refraction of light after it has passed a considerable distance below the horizon. We also know that long after the sun has set, its rays pass over the head and enter the eyes by reflection from the higher portions of the earth's atmosphere, giving us beautiful twilight long after sunset. This illustrates how a person may still live in this world after his earthly tabernacle has dissolved. In other words," smiling at Portia, "the echo of a life-song rings on through the years even after its singer has passed into the beyond."

Chapter XXIV

IT was morning. The silver of dawn had flushed into pink, and in the brightness of the east the golden sun had rolled up, sending her shining rays toward every feathery cloud in the sky. The river near Oakdale twinkled into a myriad of sparkles and broke into musical laughter as it rippled on its way. The wedge-shaped island reflected its leafy crown in the clear water which broke with merry gurgles at its point and, full of green and blue and golden lights, slipped past on either side. Upon the little island life had awakened. The cat-bird had trilled his tender song; the thrushes, robins, and bluebirds had blended in a harmonious and happy chorus, while little song-sparrows, fluttering from their morning-bath, had burst into a pæan of morning worship before beginning their labor of love for their birdlings. But it was not only bird-life that had aroused itself on the island. Two little humans were stirring also. From a soft bed of leaves a tangled golden head was slowly raised. Two big, blue eyes gazed

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dreamily up into the tree above, where, upon a branch, a bird was swelling his throat and pouring his little heart into a clear chant that ascended to heaven in liquid melody. A sudden movement from below caused the feathered songster to spread his wings suddenly and fly away. Little Earl turned reproachfully to Amy, who had sat up beside him.

"You scared my bird away," he reproved her, gravely.

Amy yawned.

"Such a pretty bird, too," grieved Earl.
"His wings were all yellow like gold."

Amy evinced her first interest.

"They'd be pretty on a hat," she observed, thoughtfully.

"Amy Ilverton, it's cruel to put birds' wings on hats!"

"Pooh!" remarked Amy. "Course I did n't mean live wings."

"They're all alive."

"No, they are n't. There's one at home I'm going to have on a hat some day. It's dead."

"Folks 'll think you killed it," argued Earl.

"Pooh!" remarked Amy again.

"Do n't you do it; do n't you do it, Amy," expostulated Earl. "At least, if you do, put

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a sign on your hat saying you do n't believe in killing birds."

But Amy's eyes were searching the woods. "Where 's Mrs. Jordan, do you s'pose?" she queried.

She arose and shook herself. The two children had been covered by a large, dark cloak, but both were fully dressed. Amy's blue gingham was limp and crumpled, but in the crotch of a tree were several other frocks, indicating that a change was ready for her when she needed it. A little shirt hanging upon a limb witnessed to the fact that Earl also was able at times to change his linen. A diminutive tent was pitched not far away, and a few, a very few, culinary articles were scattered about.

"I wonder where Mrs. Jordan is," fretted Amy again. But, although the two children sought and shouted for some moments, nobody appeared, and at last they sat down, discouraged, to wait.

"I s'pose she 's gone to buy some breakfast," said Earl, dejectedly. "Are n't you getting tired of staying here, Amy?"

"I 've been tired of it all the time," returned Amy. "Oh, dear, if we could only swim, Earl!"

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For a space they were silent. Everything was quiet. The birds were all busy feeding their young, and only the gentle lapping of the river against the island was audible. Amy arose restlessly again.

"Let's play something, Earl," she suggested.

"But I always like to eat first," he objected.

"Mrs. Jordan will prob'ly bring us something good when she comes," consoled the little girl. "Come on, let's go and see if her boat is in sight."

Hand in hand the two children made their way through the underbrush toward the margin of the river.

"There's no use going to the Oakdale side," sighed Earl. "She always goes to the other town."

The island was warm with the sun, which penetrated through every chink of its leafy roof, but the air was filled with a caressing coolness which came from the water. Wild raspberries, black and red, furnished the children with occasional tempting morsels, and here and there a big, ripe gooseberry was discovered among its green companions. But both children and birds had watched the berry-bushes

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too closely to allow of their having much ripe fruit left upon them. Chokecherries, puckery but pretty, drooped their clusters over the children's heads, and occasionally they gathered a bunch. They paused under the wild plum-trees and eyed the green fruit with regretful eyes. How slow it was in ripening! they told each other. Each plum was just as green as it was yesterday. The woodsy island showed many traces of the children's occupation. Here on the ground was a worn place beneath a tough old grapevine that had obligingly festooned itself into a swing. There a playhouse had been made under a group of drooping trees. Stumps were the chairs and tables, bright pebbles and shells the ornaments, and broken bits of glassware the dishes. The children paused for a ride on their "horses"—namely, certain low-growing branches, which, when drawn to the ground and sat upon, would bounce like a pony if one kicked a bit to assist them. But despite the attractions of the place the childish eyes were wistful as they gazed out across the river, when it was reached at last. No boat was in sight. Evidently the person for whom the children were looking was remaining away longer than usual.

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"Well, perhaps she 'll bring us something extra good when she does come," said Earl, hopefully.

"It 'll be cold stuff, anyhow," gloomed Amy. "I 'm beginning to ache for something hot."

"Soup ?" murmured Earl, reminiscently.

"Yes, or chicken; roast chicken with dressing and mashed potatoes," seconded Amy.

"Or beefsteak," added Earl.

"I do n't see why we do n't catch fish, anyway," complained Amy. "We could fry them."

"She won't have a fire, 'cause the smoke would be seen," explained Earl.

"Let 's catch some ourselves now, while she 's gone," proposed Amy, eagerly. But Earl shook his head.

"No lines nor hooks," he sighed.

Amy echoed the sigh. "Come on over to the Oakdale side," she suggested next. "Maybe we can see mamma's house."

Earl acquiesced, but without much enthusiasm. Since they had looked in vain for that house every day they had been there, was it probable they should see it to-day? The leaves which shut it from their sight had not been likely to have fallen in the night. However,

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if it pleased Amy to go, he had no objections to offer; so they proceeded amiably together toward the opposite shore. Little wild flowers caressed their bare feet as they walked. Anemones, bluebells, golden-rod, and daisies brushed their dewy heads against them, and they pushed aside with their hands great masses of ferns which grew in lacy luxuriance everywhere on the island. The little ones picked their steps carefully, making many little *detours* for the pleasure of burying their feet in deep beds of velvety moss. Amy kept a fearful and Earl a hopeful eye out for snakes, until at last the short journey was over and they came in sight of the river again. A tiny spring bubbled up near the shore, forming a little pool, the water of which overflowed in a stream which tinkled over bright pebbles to the river. The children gravely inspected a dam which they had constructed here. Finding it in good condition, they resumed their way to the river's edge, where they mounted a huge log, mossy and inviting, which stretched its length out into the water. They cautiously walked to the end of it, where they seated themselves and, dropping their feet into the water, proceeded to hold them extremely quiet, so that the minnows

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would come and nibble at their toes. The customary examination of the Oakdale bank had revealed no glimpse of the Ilverton cottage, and Amy, with a sigh, turned her back to the obstructing mass of foliage. Earl remonstrated.

"Do n't wiggle so, Amy; you 're scaring the minnies away."

Amy subsided into despondency and an extremely ungraceful attitude upon the end of the log. This brought her face to face with the island, a position she had never before taken. Her exile was irking her more than usual this morning, and her eyes wandered resentfully along the outline of the island. Suddenly her pupils dilated, her little form became tense, and she stared with suspended breath at one spot for a long, incredulous moment.

"Earl!" she breathed, when she could speak.

"Sh-h," he whispered, sibilently, "there 's a dandy big one biting my toe."

"Earl!" she shouted. "Earl, O Earl! there 's a boat!"

The bound the boy gave nearly overturned the mossy log, and the two children grasped each other and dug their bare toes into the

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rough old bark for a minute. But they were too excited to be much alarmed, and gazed with all their eyes at Amy's discovery. It was indeed a boat, a pale-green boat, nearly hidden among the bushes that grew close to the island's edge and drooped their branches into the water. A boat, unmistakably a boat; and, moreover, it had oars in it. The children spared no time for words. A boat meant release to them. A boat would take them to Oakdale, to Portia, to Aunt Caroline. It would take them to roast chicken and beefsteak and mashed potatoes. A boat! They scrambled and crept along the old log like squirrels. Amy reached the shore and ran toward the boat over the pebbles, not even feeling the sharp ones in her excitement. Earl kept in the edge of the water and ran with an eagerness that splashed drops to the top of his tangled golden head. The boat proved to be no illusion. It was solid and whole and real. In a twinkling the children were at it. Their little arms, strong with excitement and hope, pushed with such vigor that the boat moved out into the water and the children sprang into it without loss of time.

"We 'll row straight across to that big tree over there," said Earl, crimson with excitement

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and exertion; "then we 'll climb right up the bank and go home."

Home! The words lent such strength to their arms that in another minute they were rocking in the boat out in the middle of the shining river.

Chapter XXV

CAN you row, Earl?" queried Amy, excitedly.

"I s'pose so," responded the boy, struggling with a big, heavy oar. "You just waggle these things in the water, do n't you?"

"I 'll waggle one, too," offered Amy, grasping the other oar. "My, but they 're heavy! We 've got to hurry, Earl, 'cause we 're going down the river."

Earl cast a surprised glance at the big tree under which he had planned to land. How fast a boat traveled in the river! His face grew redder as he "waggled" manfully. Amy supplemented his efforts to the best of her ability, but for some reason the boat refused to change its course. It had started from the island in the middle of the river and it remained in the middle of the river, and continued to float downstream despite the utmost endeavors on the part of the rowers. Perspiration rolled off from Earl's crimson face, and

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he stood up in the boat to change his oar to what would seem a more advantageous position, when a scream from Amy startled him. He dropped his oar and turned toward her. She also was standing up in the boat and was stretching out empty hands toward her oar, which, at a tantalizing distance from the boat, was dancing merrily upon the waves.

"My oar; my oar!" wailed Amy, and with sudden apprehension Earl turned and saw, to his despair, his own oar floating upon the river at a corresponding distance from his side of the boat. Here was a dilemma indeed. How did people get to shore without oars? Warned into quietude by the rocking of the boat, the frightened children sat down again. But the tearful black eyes of Amy aroused Earl's chivalry.

"Never mind, Amy," he quavered, bravely. "Think what a dandy boatride we're having."

But Amy also could rise to the occasion. She choked back her tears.

"Yes," she assented. "We're going to the city, I guess."

Hope suddenly leaped in the boy's breast.

"My father is in the city," he exclaimed, joyously.

"And my mother!" cried Amy, quickly.

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"Oh, Earl, if the boat will only stop when we get there, we 'll be all right, won't we?"

"'Course," he agreed. "And the city is a long way down, too; so it is just as well if we do ride quite awhile. It took us an hour to come up on the cars."

Soon they were absorbed in plans. They would inquire their way when they reached the city, they decided, and find their parents at once.

"There 's no use in going to our house, I s'pose," meditated Earl. "Everybody's gone. We might go to papa's office."

"Do you know where that is?"

"Oh, no; but I can find it. I 'll say my father's name is Emmett."

"I could ask for Mrs. Ilverton," suggested Amy.

"We know another man, too," pursued Earl. "Do n't you know that dumb man who could talk?"

"Oh, yes, Dr. Foster. Oh, everything will be all right, if only the boat will stop. But it keeps so far from the shore, Earl."

It certainly was trying, and became more so as time went on, to sit, apparently still themselves in midstream, and watch the banks glide by so fast. Suppose they should n't stop when they reached the city? Suppose they did n't

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stop till night? Suppose they never stopped! The blue sky was reflected sunnily in the water; soft, white clouds seemed to float about in the river. Silently moving logs kept them company, and kingfishers and bluejays called to them from the banks. The sun broiled down upon their uncovered heads, and hunger gnawed more and more insistently at their empty little stomachs. Earl kept cheering Amy because her rosy lips drooped so piteously, and Amy kept encouraging Earl because his blue eyes were so wide and wistful; but at last Earl gave up the struggle.

"Amy," he said, "I guess we'd better get God to take the boat to shore. I'm getting 'bout 'scouraged myself."

"Well," she assented, "we do need an angel to turn this boat. I'm getting sleepy, too, with all the little winking places on the water. Let's ask Him, and then take a nap while He 'tends to it."

Accordingly two little figures slipped to their knees in the bottom of the boat.

"Dear Lord," prayed Earl, "please make the boat go to shore." He paused.

"For Jesus' sake. Amen," finished Amy.

Then, content, the two little figures lay down. The bottom of the boat was dry. The

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sun was hot, and the blue sky was calm. The flowing, murmuring water sang its lullaby, and gradually its music grew dimmer and fainter in the children's ears. Finally it ceased altogether, and peacefully they slept while they waited for God's angel to take them to shore. The river flowed softly on, its bosom trembling as it bore its precious burden; and presently it narrowed a trifle and swept, with many a flash and ripple, around a curve. Along one green bank a few houses gleamed whitely. The river was passing a town. Beneath a group of willows, which drooped and turned their silvery leaves in the breeze, was a glimmer of white bodies in the water. The boys of the village were swimming in the river. The boat was espied as soon as it rounded the curve, and by the time it came opposite the willows a half-dozen strong swimmers were out in the middle of the river to intercept it. A boat, apparently empty, floating downstream was a sight rare enough to arouse boyish curiosity, and wet hands grasped both sides of it, while heads, dripping like seals, were raised to look within. The sight of the two children, so peacefully asleep, aroused such a chorus of amazement that Amy and Earl awoke and sat up, rubbing their drowsy eyes.

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"Angels?" murmured Amy, tentatively.

"Boys," declared Earl, disappointed. His faith quickly reasserted itself, however. "Angels can make themselves look like anything they want to, you know," he reminded his little companion in a whisper.

"Yes, and water would spoil wings, would n't it?" returned Amy, *sotto voce*.

She put out a timid hand and patted a wet, brown head. "Won't you please take us to shore?" she begged.

"Sure," responded the "angel," heartily. "How'd you two kids come in this old boat alone?"

"We're going to the city," said Earl.

"Huh! Nice way to travel. Where's your oars?"

Earl pointed. He felt embarrassed and young and small, especially when the big boys laughed and exclaimed and joked him over his plight. It was very comforting to see the shore nearing, though; so he merely relapsed into a dignified silence, and it was Amy who explained that they wished to be landed, so they could take a train to the city. Her mother and Earl's father were there, she said. The boys swam, three on either side of the boat, each with a hand upon it; and when they got within wading

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distance of the shore they called several of their fellows, who were dressed, upon the shore, to come and pull the boat to the beach. This was accomplished willingly, and Earl and Amy stepped upon dry land with gratitude and promptness. Thanking their deliverers, and inquiring the way to the depot, they continued upon their journey. Their way took them through a sloping meadow filled with wild-flowers and tall, feathery grasses. Milkweeds as tall as themselves grew in clumps, and butterflies hovered above them lightly. The air was sweet with clover, and big velvety bees bumbled about. The children crawled under a wire fence, acquiring some grass-stains and three-cornered tears in their clothing, and then they found themselves in a weed-grown pasture. A few mild cows regarded them benevolently, chewing placid cuds; but the children clutched each other's hands and scurried past them, rolling breathlessly under another wire fence. Before them now appeared the depot. They could see the long, shining railroad-track, and they sat down a moment to regain their breath.

"I'm hungry," complained Amy.

"So am I," responded Earl. "That's the only thing that's bad about this nice adventure. Do n't you know how to milk, Amy?"

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"Milk?"

"Yes. You might milk one of those bossies."

Amy regarded the dangerous beasts a moment in silence, then, "It's men's business to milk," she retorted, severely.

Earl dug a toe into the grass uneasily. "Maybe we can find some sorrel," he suggested, in a small voice.

A search for this delectable herb was begun, but before many of the acid little leaves had been found and eaten, a warning whistle was heard. Scrambling to their feet, the children raced for the depot. A number of people were on the platform. The engine was quenching its thirst at the water-tank, and Amy and Earl flew toward the cars. A large woman, loaded with parcels and surrounded by a family of children, was being helped aboard by the conductor. Earl's arm was seized, and he was swung to the platform of the car with the rest. Amy was passed up next, and, unnoticed by the large woman, they entered the train as members of her family. They rode to the city so, the conductor passing them with a careless glance. When the city station was reached, the two children, somewhat affrighted by all the con-

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fusion, pressed in among the large woman's children and with them left the train and reached the safety of the waiting-room. From that place, hand in hand, bareheaded, barefooted, soiled and torn, they passed through the door and braved the streets of the city.

Dr. Foster was surprised by visitors when he reached his office after lunch that day. Upon opening the door he was overwhelmed by the rush of two small people who clasped him about the knees, laughing and shouting in glee. A man who had been seated by a window arose and came forward, and the doctor gazed in speechless amazement from him to the uplifted faces of Amy and Earl.

"Do you know these children?" inquired the man, and the doctor found his tongue.

"Know them," he shouted, snatching them up in his arms. A vision of Margaret Adams's worried dark eyes was before him. "Know them?" he exulted, kissing them over and over. How would Margaret look when he restored them to her arms? "Know them?" he repeated, tossing Amy high in the air. "I should rather think I did know them."

"Very well, then; I will go," observed the stranger. "I found the youngsters on the

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street, and they gave me your name. 'No, no; no thanks are necessary. Do n't mention it. I am pleased to have been of service."

The stranger gone, Dr. Foster drew the children into his private office and closed the door.

"Now then, tell me all about it," he said; "but first—"

He reached for the telephone and called up Margaret Adams. The task was a pleasant one, and a smile irradiated his face as he turned again to the children. He knew that Margaret, overjoyed, was even then on her way to his office.

"Now tell me," he urged; but the children scarcely knew how to comply.

"The man took us to lunch," volunteered Earl. "We had been looking at the things to eat in the window."

"Such a grand place to eat!" broke in Amy. "Such a-many tables, and ministers to wait on them all!"

"He did n't know where my papa's office was," continued Earl.

"And nobody knew my mamma," added Amy, in disgust. "Such a ignorant lot of folks!"

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"But where have you been all this time?" pressed the doctor.

"On the street and in the eating-place," replied Earl, "and afterwards in a place where the man looked in a book to find you."

"But before that, I mean," urged the doctor; "where have you been all the time you were lost?"

A jumbled description of the island and Mrs. Jordan, of the boat and the angels was being listened to by the doctor when Margaret arrived. With smiles and tears and kisses she greeted the children, and presently she took them home with her. The doctor turned his attention to the patients who began to arrive, but before the middle of the afternoon his satisfaction was turned to consternation. A telephone call came from Margaret.

"Oh, Dr. Foster," she wailed through the phone, "the children are lost again!"

Chapter XXVI

THE morning after Professor Zeigler and his daughter had dined with Mrs. Huntington, Portia decided to return home. The magnetic presence of the professor being removed, it was easier for Portia to remember his demolition of her ambition than the healing words with which he had salved her wound. A spasm of homesickness seized her. She wanted to see Aunt Caroline and to talk with Uncle Henry. But above all else her heart ached with a sick yearning for Donald. How could she have left him in anger? she asked herself. Life would be dark indeed until she could make her peace with him again, and could pour into his sympathizing ear her disappointment and receive his comfort. Portia felt, moreover, that it was time she absented herself on Agnes's account. Agnes was becoming very anxious to go home, and her inquiries about Amy were becoming more and more difficult to answer. It was under pretext of going ahead to prepare the cot-

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tage for her homecoming that Portia made her escape from her friend.

"Either Donald or I will come for you very soon," she told Agnes. "Just as soon as you are able to use your eyes enough to travel, we will see that you get home. But I must go now, Agnes; indeed I must."

So she took an early train for home, Mrs. Huntington driving her to the station. Upon arriving in Oakdale she left her heavy satchel at the depot and walked up the hill to the farm. How glad she was to be home again, she told herself, looking right and left as she traversed the familiar road. When she came in sight of the farmhouse she saw Uncle Henry sitting in his wheel-chair upon the lawn beneath a spreading oak. Loving tears welled to Portia's eyes, and she sped toward him across the grassy yard. His face lightened at the sight of her, and when she threw herself upon her knees beside him, he welcomed her with tenderest words and caresses. After a few moments she ran into the house to see Aunt Caroline; but shortly she appeared on the lawn again. She brought a low chair, in which she seated herself close to the old farmer's side. He laid his hand upon her head and gazed fondly at her.

"It seems to me you look tired, even sad,

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my daughter," he observed. "Is anything the matter, dear?"

Tears rose to the brown of Portia's eyes, and without hesitation she yielded to her desire to unbosom herself.

"Uncle Henry," she began, "I am a disappointed girl."

The tone was so tragic that almost Uncle Henry smiled.

"And what has disappointed you so, dear child?" he inquired, sympathetically.

"Oh, Uncle Henry, I find that I am so ordinary, so mediocre. I can excel in nothing. I wanted to find some one thing that I could do exceptionally well, and then I wanted to give myself to that work. Something in an art form, you know, Uncle Henry, like poetry or music or painting."

Portia paused for breath, but the old man did not speak. He continued to gently stroke her hair, and after a second she continued:

"You know, Uncle Henry, there is another kind of a life than the one I live; a wider, deeper, richer life—the life of art. I long to enter it in some capacity. 'Truth—deep, enduring truth—can be expressed in no other way so effectually as in an art form.' "

Uncle Henry smiled. "That does n't

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sound like you, dear," he remarked. "Did n't you read it somewhere?"

Portia blushed a little. "I read it in a musical journal," she confessed. "But I shall not be reading musical journals any more now," she added, with a sigh.

"Why not, dear?"

"Because—because, oh, Uncle Henry, a great professor heard me sing, and—and he said I—that I have only an ordinary voice."

"Ah!" The tone expressed so much sympathy that Portia's eyes overflowed for a moment. "Your voice is the sweetest in all the world to me, little Portia," comforted Uncle Henry. "And did the professor give you no encouragement whatever, dear?"

"Oh," she replied, dashing away her tears, "he was kind, and he put a beautiful thought in my mind about making a song of my life. But—but, Uncle Henry—"

"Well, dear?"

"It was only a short time ago that an artist told me—or, rather, I learned through my acquaintance with him—that I have no ability to paint."

"And did you want to paint, my child?"

"Want to! Oh, Uncle Henry! And that is n't all, either. I discovered that I can not

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write poetry. In fact, there is nothing special for me to do in the world. I am only capable of the ordinary, commonplace work of life. I shall never accomplish anything great or beautiful or good."

"Dear child, did Jesus Christ, when He was upon earth, ever paint a picture, or write a poem, or, so far as we know, sing a song?"

"But—but—why, Uncle Henry, He performed miracles."

"And so can you perform a miracle, Portia."

"Why, Uncle Henry!"

"When Aunt Caroline and I took our wedding-trip, my dear, we saw some sights which I have never forgotten. More than in the other wonderful things we saw, I was interested in the mosaics. They seemed like miracles to me then, and do still, in a way. Some of these mosaics decorated walls and floors, and were made of countless tiny pieces of colored stone, and the effect was beautiful in the extreme. We also saw magnificent cathedral windows composed of mosaics of glass. It was wonderful to note the delicate gradation of tints and colors, and to consider what tiny particles had been used in the construction of the beautiful pictures and designs. Marvelous patience and

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perseverance must have been possessed by the makers of these mosaics. And think how much more beautiful mosaics are than walls or windows composed of but one tint or one sheet of glass. A mosaic is a good illustration of a life-work, my dear. Just as all these tiny pieces of marble or glass can be transformed into a superb work of art, so the countless little acts of a commonplace life may be converted into a creation fit to be offered to the King of kings."

"But, Uncle Henry," hesitated Portia, "even though that be true, can not the talented people, the geniuses of the world, make a more beautiful mosaic of their lives than we ordinary folks?"

"No, no, dear. If that were so, it would mean that God had been partial to some of His children, giving them better material to work with than He had given to others. Do you think that any human being can in reality do anything well enough to please the eye and ear of Almighty God? Where is the artist who can paint a picture fit to offer to the One who tinted yonder sky, who paints the wild-rose's blush and the opalescent gleam of the sea? Where is the musician who can sing well enough to please the King, around whose throne the angel harpers ring, and before whom

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the morning-stars sang together? And where is the poet who can choose words which will charm the One who speaks through the language of Nature and Science, whose rhythm is majesty, and whose rhyme is reason?"

"But, Uncle Henry, I do n't understand."

"My dear, it is love that tints all actions, great or small. Some people may be very much surprised when their record is unrolled in heaven. Perhaps some great deed which they had expected to see credited to them in large letters may have to be searched for with a magnifying-glass, while some forgotten little service may shine forth from a page in dazzling rays like the light from a jewel. Whether a deed be little or big, according to a worldly standpoint, matters nothing. To God it is valuable only in accordance to the amount of love with which it was performed.

"Oh, then—then do you mean that little, common things, such as I do—"

Portia paused, and, smiling, Uncle Henry continued:

"I think, my darling, that the Heavenly Father will be very well pleased with the person who brings Him a life-effort in the shape of thousands of tiny acts of kindness, numberless little sacrifices, countless petty duties well

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performed, and a multitude of small humiliations and temptations well met and overcome. I think that such a life will form a mosaic whose beauty will compare well with the efforts of those people who present their lives in the shape of some one or two great deeds, paintings, books, musical achievements, or whatever they may be."

"Oh, Uncle Henry! And I have been so envying brilliant, talented people!"

"I am not attempting to undervalue genius, Portia, dear. I as well as the rest of the world owe a great debt of thanks to the brilliant people of the world. I am only trying to show you that our Heavenly Father has dealt fairly with us all, and that we ordinary people have within reach of our hands as much and as beautiful material out of which to fashion our lives as the greatest genius in the world."

"And you have showed it to me, dear Uncle Henry. I know I shall never be discontented and envious again. I shall try to put tiny little good things together in my life every day, even though they do always have to be the same commonplace things over and over."

She ended a little ruefully, and Uncle Henry replied: "No two days are ever alike in the world of Nature, dear child, although they are

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made up of the same things over and over. The sun rises and sets, but each dawn shows new tints of pearl and rose in the eastern sky, and each sunset paints a different symphony of colors in the west. The same moon glides across the sky each night; but the clouds, the air, and the coloring are always in some way different. Never is the same effect repeated. And so it is with our every-day lives. Even my monotonous life has no two days twice alike. True, I find but little variety to put into my mosaic, but I try to put love enough around what I do find to tint the fragments harmoniously."

Impulsively Portia threw her arms around him. "Dear, dear uncle!" she cried. "Your life is a poem and a song as well as a mosaic, and you are always busy painting smiles upon sad faces. I feel one growing on mine already, and I thank you more than I can say for what you have told me. Now I will go in and help Aunt Caroline with the dinner."

Chapter XXVII

DONALD met Portia with a stony face when he entered the kitchen and found her dishing up the dinner. When she raised timid eyes and spoke to him, he answered briefly and with the most frigid politeness. The meal was a misery to Portia. She could not eat. Donald discussed the crops with his father, and ignored her entirely. If the old farmer noticed anything amiss between his two young people, he made no sign, and Aunt Caroline pretended not to notice anything.

During the afternoon Portia was restless and unhappy. Mr. and Mrs. Dennison settled themselves upon the porch with reading and sewing, but Portia could not remain quiet. Several times she started for the field where Donald was riding the cultivator; but each time she caught sight of his uncompromising figure she weakened and turned back to the house. Finally she set to work feverishly to prepare a specially tempting supper for Donald. She found a hired man and caused him to kill a

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chicken. This she plucked and dressed and put on to cook. She bent her back over the strawberry bed and broiled her complexion among the currant bushes. When the supper-hour drew nigh she decorated the table with flowers and brought forth the prettiest china. She made a salad and put honey in a graceful dish. She heaped red and white raspberries and currants in tempting mounds, and made a delicious strawberry shortcake. She was drawing a tin of light biscuits from the oven when Aunt Caroline entered the kitchen.

"Why, darling," exclaimed that surprised woman, "is company coming to supper?"

She glanced from the chicken, browning delicately upon the stove, to the decorated table, and then to the daintily-gowned girl. Portia had donned the dress Donald liked best; but her face was far from happy.

"Only—only Donald is coming," she faltered, her lips trembling, and Aunt Caroline understood.

"Dear child!" she murmured, tenderly. And then Donald came.

But Portia's loving effort was wasted. Donald appeared sterner than he had at noon. He might have been eating salt-pork and cabbage off from a tin plate, for all the appre-

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ciation he showed of the dainty supper. Aunt Caroline's indignation arose at his hardness of heart.

"Has n't Portia prepared us a delightful supper, Donald?" she prodded him at length.

"Very good, indeed," he responded, coldly. "Father, I believe the south meadow is yielding far better than it did last year."

"This shortcake is delicious, Donald," pursued his relentless mother. "And see, Portia has remembered your partiality for whipped cream."

Donald waved away the shortcake. "I do n't care for any, mother," he said. "I am not at all hungry."

After a light meal he arose and left the table, and Portia, unable to restrain her tears, followed precipitantly. She saw him go for the milk-pails, and desperately she followed him to the porch. She saw a boy meet him and hand him a note. He opened and read it, and she saw him glance toward her and hesitate. The hesitation was but momentary, however; then he strode rapidly along the path, throwing the note, open, upon a bench beneath the maple-tree. Portia gazed after him yearningly, and as he disappeared, her glance came back to the note. What could it be? That it

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had some connection with her she felt almost positive. Instinctively she went toward it and reached out her hand, but she hesitated. Perhaps it was wrong to read it. The sun was setting, and one of his golden rays illuminated the garden-bench. Portia's eyes, traveling to where she had restrained her hand from going, plainly distinguished her own name in the note and read "Margaret Adams and Dr. Foster" as the signature. In a second more the paper was in her hand, and her eyes had devoured its contents. It read thus:

"Meet us on the island in the river, opposite Mrs. Ilverton's cottage, to-night at ten o'clock. Amy and Earl are there. Bring Portia."

Portia clutched the paper and read the words over and over. She could scarcely believe her eyes. Amy and Earl upon the island! Upon that little green spot in the river which no one ever noticed, no one ever visited! How did they get there, and how did the doctor and Margaret ever discover them! For a few minutes amazement was her principal feeling; then it began to give way to joy. The children were found! Agnes need not have her new-born joy

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turned to sorrow as soon as she reached her home; and the children—dear little Earl and gypsy Amy—would soon be safe at home again. She felt like rushing at once to the island. Would there be a boat to take them across the water? She glanced at the signature of the note and smiled. Surely, since Margaret and Dr. Foster had the matter in hand, there would be a boat. Margaret and the doctor? A new little thought flashed into Portia's mind, and, sitting down upon the bench, she began to recall many things that pointed to a decided warmth of feeling between these two young people. "Dear Margaret!" she murmured, half aloud. Her own worries had taken sudden flight. She did not regret having read the note. She would confess the act to Donald as soon as he came back, and in the flush of her joy she could not doubt but he would forgive her. He would forgive not only that offense, but all else he was holding against her, and together they would go to the island and find the children and bring them home. Before long she saw him coming, and springing up, she ran toward him, waving the note in the air and crying out a medley of confession and joy which ought to have melted a heart of stone. But Donald brushed grimly past her, and she stood where

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he left her, with her face falling into piteous lines of sorrow. How could he be so cruel? she despaired. Was he never going to speak to her again? She put out her hand to a lilac-bush to steady herself, and a robin, affrighted, flew from it, with his sharp, three-noted call. Alighting in the maple-tree, he trilled forth his evening-song, and forcing back her tears, Portia went slowly into the house to help Aunt Caroline with the dishes. She was pale and quiet, and her feet dragged wearily, but she would not be persuaded to go away and rest, and it was not until the last dish was in place, the crumbs brushed up, and the rooms tidied, that she again went out of doors. Twilight had fallen, but its fragrant duskiness filled Portia with a sort of terror. She thrust out her hands to push the soft darkness away from her. It seemed to smother her and to press her pain relentlessly upon her heart as it shut out the world from her eyes. It represented life as it must henceforward be for her if Donald remained obdurate and unforgiving. The scent of the honeysuckle floated around her, and its sweetness drove her away from the porch. She went into the flower-garden; but there the petunias and pinks filled the air with perfume, and

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the atmosphere of peace about the flowers drove her away from them. Stars began to spangle the sky as she wandered restlessly from place to place. At last she seated herself upon the side porch, under the odorless clematis vine, and it was from there that she saw Donald as he emerged from the house. It was past nine o'clock, and Portia rightly conjectured that he was starting for the island, in accordance with the request of the note. With a sudden determination she arose and followed him. The doctor and Margaret had invited her, too, she told herself, and perhaps the children would need her. Donald was stern and unkind and altogether unlike himself, and he might frighten the children. She kept at a considerable distance behind him as they descended the hill. Her light dress flew out and caught in the brambles beside the road, and the dew wet her thin slippers through quickly. Donald strode rapidly ahead. In certain parts of the road she lost sight of him entirely, dense shadows hiding his form. At such times she almost shrieked aloud in her nervousness and fear. She was glad when they left the woodsy road and began to walk through the town. Donald avoided the main streets, and they met but few people.

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When they did, Portia shrank into the shadows until they had passed, and then sped, with her heart in her throat, after the dark figure of Donald. She saw lighted windows in some houses they passed, and for some reason their gleam started the sobs in her breast and caused hot tears to flow. At last the dark little cottage of Mrs. Ilverton's was reached, and opposite it Donald plunged into the woodsy path leading to the river, and Portia, almost wishing she had not come, followed after. The moon had been hidden by a cloud, and the wild place looked dark and very fearful to the trembling girl. Donald had bounded with quick steps down the path; but Portia, hindered by her skirts and her timidity, advanced but slowly. The dense black shadows terrified her. Rustling sounds in the leaves brought her heart to her throat, and when the moon shone out again and suddenly she saw a crooked black root in the path she halted and desperately attempted to shriek to Donald. Her voice died soundless in her throat, however, and in an abandonment of terror she began to run. Her foot tripped in the root, and she fell headlong to the ground. Sobbing in gasps, she managed to get upon her feet again and in some way forced herself

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along the dreadful path until, finally, the trees were passed. When the river, sparkling in the mild moonlight, appeared before her she experienced a breath of relief, especially since Donald's figure was visible for a moment. He was just disappearing down the bank, and like a deer Portia sped after him. He had found a boat upon the beach and was examining it. He pushed it out into the river and was about to step in when, in an agony lest he should leave her, Portia cried out his name: "Donald! Donald! Donald!"

He turned in amazement. The moonlight lay white along the bank, the black earth looking like velvet under its light. Down the steep path, the loose dirt giving away beneath her feet, her golden-brown hair tumbled, and her white dress torn, came Portia.

"Wait for me, Donald; wait!" she panted.

She clung to a stunted oak for a second, her strength leaving her at his nearness. She swayed a trifle, and to save her from falling he sprang forward and threw his arm around her. She clung to him as he helped her down to the pebbly beach, but as soon as she could stand he put her sternly from him and frowned heavily. The sweetness of her was almost too

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much for his resolution, and he braced himself mentally. He must harden his heart. She had befooled him enough.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, severely.

She gazed piteously up into his face and moved a little nearer.

"I—I want to go with you," she faltered.

His frown grew heavier as he steeled his melting heart.

"Well," he granted, grudgingly, "I can't leave you here, of course, and I can't send you home alone; so I shall have to take you. Get into the boat."

Portia obeyed the ungracious command meekly, and in another moment they were afloat. The river looked like molten silver to Portia. Its ripples seemed to smile and dance and toss millions of glittering jewels into the air. The drops from Donald's oars fell like diamonds into the water again, and the song of the river sang a sweet peace into her troubled heart. Her slipper touched Donald's foot in the boat. He was close to her, and they were alone together. She raised her eyes in mute thanksgiving to the purple sky, where the great, glowing stars hung in splendor. Surely in this perfect world the heart could not be broken.

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“Donald!” she breathed.

No answer; but the boat glided into the shadow of the island trees.

“Donald, Donald!” she pleaded again.

The boat grated on the shore. She stood up, a vision of loveliness in the shadow, and Donald’s arms closed about her.

Chapter XXVIII

PON the island two little children were again sleeping upon the leaves. Amy lay with limbs relaxed and one rosy cheek pillow'd upon a brown, dimpled arm; but little Earl had passed only within the borderland of slumber. The exciting events of the preceding days had told upon his delicate nervous organization, and he tossed restlessly, while ever and anon his blue eyes opened wide. In these transient periods of wakefulness he noticed the big, black tree-shadows and the checkered pattern the moon-beams threw upon the ground. The mournful hoot of an owl which hunted overhead sent a shiver down his spine and, together with the little feathered inhabitants of the island, he cowered closer into his nest. The soft lullaby of the river, gentle, soothing, and sweet, lulled him back to slumber each time he was aroused, and always as he drifted off he saw Mrs. Jordan sitting at the door of the tent, her grotesque shadow falling athwart the ground, and he smiled with a feeling of safety. He liked Mrs.

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Jordan, he told himself sleepily. Of course, he was sorry she had again brought him and Amy to the imprisoning island; but still she was always good to them. He was glad he had fought for her that afternoon, when Dr. Foster had spoken so harshly to her. Dr. Foster must not be unkind to Mrs. Jordan, he reflected. To be sure, he had been glad to see the doctor, and especially so to see dear Margaret Adams. They had arrived and surprised poor Mrs. Jordan, who had wept piteously when the doctor talked to her; wept until her little champion had felt obliged to interfere in her behalf. The doctor had relented at that, and a pleasant time had followed as the two children piloted their visitors around the island, exhibiting all its most delightful play-spots. The guests had departed after that, promising to come again very soon to take the children home. Home was a sweet word, and mingling its music with the singing water, it lulled little Earl to sleep, and it was some time before he awoke again. When he did, his eyes fell at once upon Margaret and the doctor. It was their voices that had awakened him, and he felt glad, in an unsurprised way, when he saw them. He was too comfortable to get up at once and welcome them, however, and he turned himself a little upon his

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leafy bed, when suddenly another sight struck his eyes. He sat up quickly and stared with all his delighted strength. Portia had come! His dear, beloved Portia; and Mr. Hamlin was with her! They stood together beneath the sheltering arms of the giant trees, and the doctor and Margaret were greeting them with laughter and merry tones. Earl clapped his hands and laughed, too; but they did not hear him. Then he reached back and put an awakening hand upon Amy's cheek, not turning his eyes, for fear the people he saw might vanish like a dream.

"See, Amy," he cried; "is n't that Portia under the tree? See, Amy; see."

Amy stirred drowsily. Her face was turned in the opposite direction. She opened sleepy black eyes.

"Yes," she murmured, "it is Portia and Donald."

"No, no; not Donald, Amy. It's Mr. Hamlin; do n't you see?"

Amy became wider awake.

"I guess I know Donald Dennison when I see him," she retorted, with spirit.

She sat up beside Earl, rubbing her eyes, and he turned his head in her direction. Instantly his face fell, and a disappointed sigh

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swelled his little bosom. It was only a dream, then! Of course, there could not be two Portias. One could not be standing upon his right, beside Mr. Hamlin, and the other upon his left, beside Donald Dennison. He fell back upon his leafy bed with patient resignation. But Portia was not so easily convinced. The feeling that she was in a dream was indeed strongly upon her. The woods in which she stood seemed unreal, the wavering shadows and murmuring water appeared like sights and sounds in a dream of enchantment. But here, breathing and real, was Donald, within reach of her hand. Her eyes caught a glimpse of Margaret and the doctor, but only a fleeting glimpse, because her gaze became fastened, fascinated, upon a vision straight before her. Who could this girl be who stood beside Elmer Hamlin, this girl who was an exact counterpart of herself? Mirrors had no place upon islands; otherwise she would believe that she was looking at her own reflection in a glass. The same surprise that she was feeling was reflected in the girlish face before her. Involuntarily she moved forward, and the figure before her also advanced. No word was spoken. The screech-owl passed again overhead, but his hoot was unnoticed by the absorbed group below. Donald

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and Elmer stood as though turned to stone. Margaret and the doctor unconsciously clasped hands, and at last the two lovely girls met in a patch of bright moonlight. Two pairs of hands touched, and then the spell was broken. Both girls cried out sharply, and Donald and Elmer sprang forward, while Margaret rippled into a delighted laugh.

"Girls, girls!" she cried. "Let me introduce you to each other. You are twins, and your names are Portia and Pearl; your surname was Estabrook, but now one is Dennison and one Overton."

Questions and ejaculations poured from Donald and Elmer; but the twin sisters, bewildered and uncomprehending, could only cling closely to each other and tremble and laugh and cry. Amy and Earl added to the confusion by running about in the group, raising excited voices and trying to get the attention of every one at once. Only one person stood aloof, and that was the tall, dark woman who had been the children's captor. But she was not long allowed to remain quiet. Margaret seized her hand and pulled her forward.

"Sit down; sit down, everybody!" she commanded. "Here is some one who can tell us all about everything."

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She finally managed to seat the party; the twins still clinging together, Donald and Elmer close beside them, each devouring his own loved one with his eyes, and noting already about her many little points in which she differed from her sister. Margaret pulled Mrs. Jordan down to the ground beside herself as she found a place near the doctor, and the children crowded in among the arms, which all willingly opened to receive them.

"Mrs. Jordan can tell us everything," declared Margaret again, and Portia looked at the woman with curiosity while Pearl whispered in her ear, "I have known Mrs. Jordan all my life; she was my nurse."

The woman caught the whisper and nodded. "I was Portia's nurse, too, Miss Pearl, although you were both too little to remember it. It was when the ship sunk on the ocean that your father and mother were drowned. They were coming to America from England, and I was with them as your nurse. When their bodies were cast up on the island where I and a few others who were saved were standing, a little living baby was found lashed to the breast of each dead parent. It was a heart-breaking time for me, and when finally I was landed in a strange country with you two helpless little

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ones in my care, I did not know what to do. I tried to find work; but, burdened with you as I was, I was unsuccessful. I had no education; could scarcely read or write, although having lived always as lady's maid or nurse in the best families, I was able to use good language. At last I was forced by necessity to put you both in an asylum. I then found work easily and looked forward to the day when I should be able to take you out and keep you myself. You were so nearly alike that no one could tell you apart. Your father had bought for each of you a gold chain and a locket upon which was engraved your name. He also put upon each of you a little ring bearing your name. I left the chains and rings upon you when I took you to the asylum, but I removed the lockets and kept them myself. One day when I visited the asylum I found, to my dismay, that little Portia was gone. The matron had allowed her to be adopted. Knowing how your mother would have felt to see you separated, I was frantic, but I was also helpless. The matron refused to give me the name of the person who had taken Portia; but, moved by my tears, she consented to consult me before allowing Pearl to be adopted. Within a few months Mrs. Overton took Pearl. I could

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not object, but I begged so piteously to be taken into the household in some capacity that my plea was granted and I became Pearl's nurse. I told Mrs. Overton about Portia. I showed her the two lockets and begged her to trace Portia, so that the two children might know each other as they grew up. She always promised what I asked, but always put me off, and she forbade me, on pain of losing my position, to tell Pearl that she had a sister. When the proper time arrived she would tell the news herself, she said. Mr. Overton was a pleasant, easy-going man, fond of speculating, and at times he would be very prosperous, and then again almost penniless. It was after one of his unsuccessful speculations that he died, about a year ago, and his family was left with almost nothing to live upon. The shock made a nervous invalid of his wife; but Pearl rose bravely to the occasion. She and I together have supported Mrs. Overton since her husband's death. And it is since I have seen Pearl struggling so bravely alone that I have grown more and more anxious that she should have her sister's love to comfort her. One time when Pearl came home from the library she told me about Mr. Hamlin calling her Portia. My whole heart leaped up in hope, and although I said

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nothing to her, the next day when I chanced to see Mr. Hamlin I took a good look at him, and since Pearl said he had mentioned the town of Oakdale, I followed him there. I saw him go to the Dennison house, and that afternoon I saw Portia in the village. The moment I saw her I knew she was Pearl's twin sister; but respecting my promise to Mrs. Overton, I decided to gain her consent before revealing the secret. That night I followed Mr. Hamlin and Portia home and peeped in the window. I had seen the old, familiar chain hanging around Portia's neck, and it seemed to me that if I could just get that and show it to Mrs. Overton as proof, she would be willing to go to Oakdale to see Portia. But I only succeeded in frightening Portia and I lost my return ticket to the city. It was in Pearl's pocket-book, which I had taken in my hurry. In watching Portia and her friends by the river, I had noticed a little island; and so I stole a boat further up the river and rowed myself there and slept that night. The next day I did a day's work in the town across the river and earned money to take me home again. But Mrs. Overton refused to credit my story. I had brooded so long over the loss of Portia that I had become a monomaniac, she said.

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I went to Oakdale again, determined to get Portia's chain and show it to Mrs. Overton. If she refused then to reveal the secret to Pearl, I should break my word and do it myself, I determined. But my note to Portia proved a failure; and no wonder! It was a silly plan. But when one day I saw Portia and her friends at a lawn party, and saw the chain glittering on this little boy's neck, I thought I had found my chance. Fortune favored me. The children ran away, and at last Earl was separated even from Amy. It was then I tried to get the chain; but he struggled, and to keep him from screaming I had to cover his mouth and carry him away bodily. By dint of threats I kept him quiet until I had gained the island. But then I was in trouble again. I had secured the chain, but I dared not set the child free until I had accomplished my purpose. He cried bitterly for his friends, and especially for Amy, who, he said, would be frightened if he did not come back. At last I decided to get Amy, to keep him company on the island while I went to the city. It was an easy matter to accomplish this the next morning, since I found the little girl alone, and she very willingly accompanied me. But I learned of the search which was being made for Earl, and I was very much

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frightened. I did not dare go to the city for some time, and when I did I took the children. I was in a store buying some garments for Earl when the children recognized this young lady and she so nearly reached them. I was so alarmed at my narrow escape that, without waiting to see Mrs. Overton, I hurried back to my refuge, taking a night-train on the opposite side of the river from Oakdale. I have been very miserable and undecided what to do. When I found the children gone the other morning, I at once surmised what they had done. I hurried to the city and, thinking that Earl would find his way home, I hid myself in the shrubbery in the Emmett yard; and when the children ran out to see Earl's rabbits, I captured them again. Perhaps it was cruel of me—no doubt it was—and foolish, also; but I did n't know what to do, and was so afraid of being found out."

Chapter XXIX

THE group, which had sat in absorbed attention during Mrs. Jordan's story, stirred into life as she bent her head and burst into tears. Pearl left her place between her sister and her lover and threw her arms around her old nurse's neck. Portia, without a moment's hesitation, followed her sister's example, and together they comforted the woman who had been actuated in all her endeavors by nothing but love for themselves. The children stirred from the sleep into which the story had lulled them and begged to be taken home. The doctor consulted his watch and declared that he must take the midnight train for the city. So the two boats that Mrs. Jordan had purloined were brought into use, and soon the party stood on the Oakdale shore. Portia looked at the bank down which she had climbed in pursuit of Donald, and she recalled the stern face with which he had received her. She looked up at him as he stood beside her now, and he read her thoughts in her eyes.

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"Forgive me, darling," he whispered, contritely.

Hamlin caught the whisper and looked down at the lovely girl at his own side.

"Can you ever forgive me, Pearl?" he said, humbly.

"What have I to forgive?" she replied, with a smile.

"Think of my imagining you to be insane!"

"Oh, but I had about come to the same conclusion myself. Mr. Dennison confused me so."

"Forgive me, Pearl," cried Donald, turning to her.

"As for my conduct toward you, Miss Portia, it was abominable. I blush to think of it," said Hamlin.

"Then do n't think," cried Portia, gayly. "It was no worse than mine toward you."

"I'm glad I do n't have to ask any one's forgiveness," the doctor congratulated himself. "By the way, look at that island."

They looked. The moon was sailing in majesty across the sky. Numerous pearly clouds drifted near her, but she showered her light unobstructed down upon the earth. The island, caressed by the rippling river, lifted its

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plumy tree-branches until they were outlined against the blue of the sky in feathery green beauty. Peace brooded over the scene. A veritable island of enchantment it appeared to be, floating upon the silver river.

"What a delightful place to spend a honeymoon!" murmured the doctor, with a sidelong look at Margaret by his side.

Three girlish faces blushed in the moonlight, and the doctor continued, more boldly: "We six, for instance, could make an ideal camping-spot on that island. We could clear the underbrush away and erect tents. We could fish and ride upon the water in the moonlight, and even make long excursions up and down the river if we chose."

Portia found her tongue. "It is too late this year, girls," she said. "It is nearly fall already."

"But what could be more magnificent than autumn on that river?" exclaimed Hamlin, enthusiastically. "Think of the foliage along the banks and on that island!"

"Perhaps we can find a better place for the honeymoon," commented Donald, looking at the island with the disparagement engendered by long belief in its insignificance. "The place

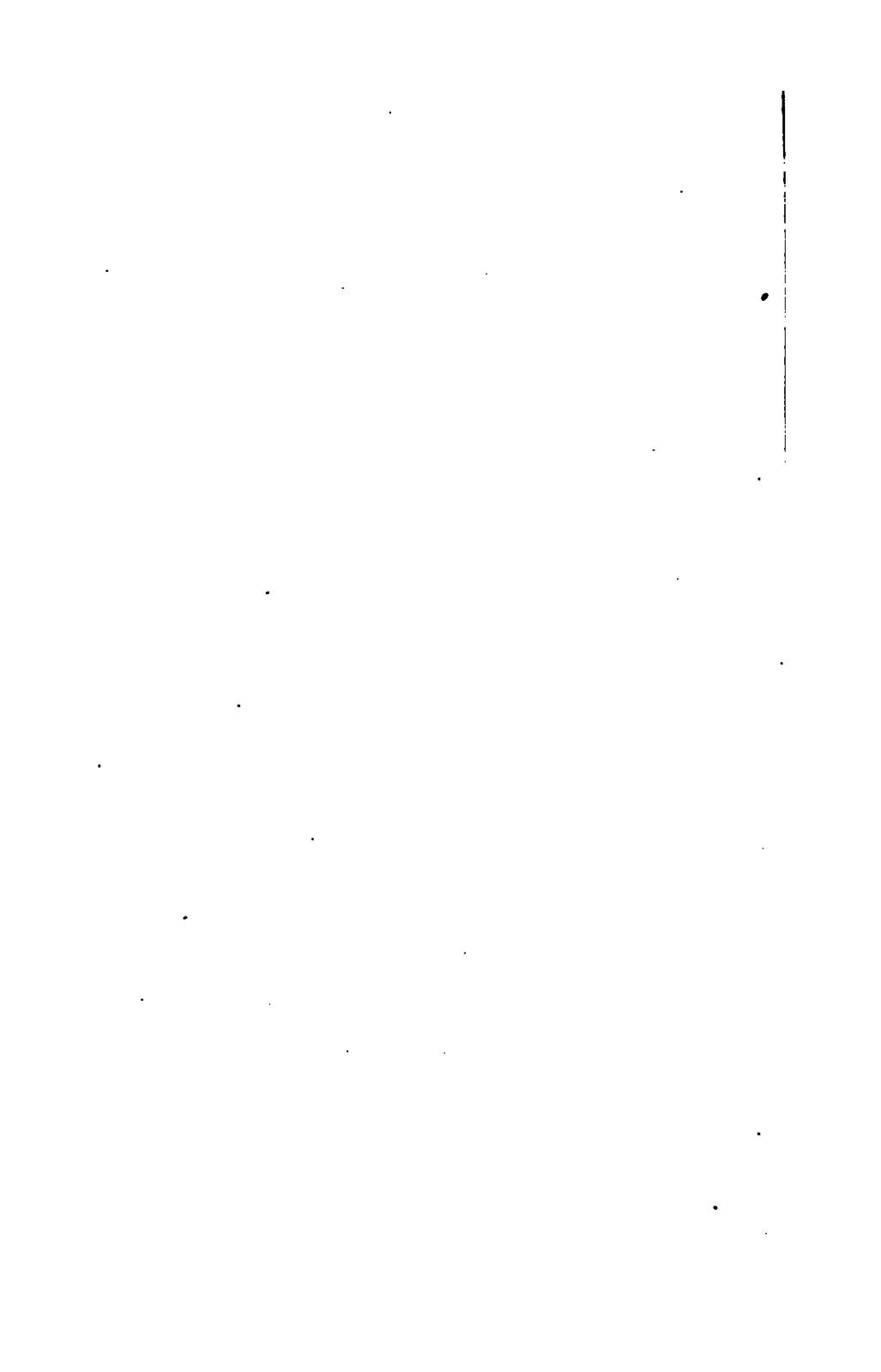
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does n't matter much, anyway. It is the honey-moon itself that we want and must have very soon."

Little Earl looked up at the moon with sleepy eyes.

"I do n't care much 'bout moons," he observed, "but it 's a long time since I 've had any honey. Do you suppose Aunt Caroline 's abed yet?"

Everybody laughed and the children were swung to strong shoulders as the party climbed the bank and started without further delay for the farmhouse.





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